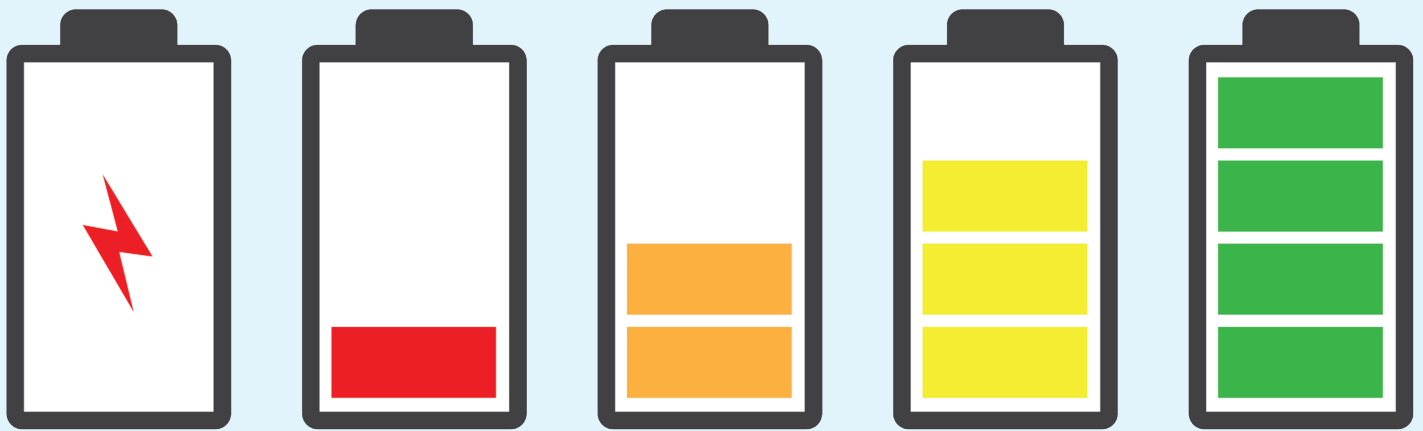


## RECHARGE your district initiatives



## with these 10 STRATEGIES

BY WADE WATSON

**H**ow do you sustain K-12 district initiatives? It is challenging to maintain their support over time. Teaching and learning initiatives, despite being well-intentioned, often struggle to gain traction due to limited teacher acceptance or inconsistent program fidelity, so much so that many of us are familiar with the concept of “initiative decay.” Even the most promising initiatives can deteriorate due to staff turnover, leadership

transitions, the introduction of new programs, and a gradual decline in enthusiasm.

In 2021, this was the situation we found ourselves in at Maricopa Unified School District in Arizona. As the director of curriculum and instruction, I am part of the team that selects district initiatives and curricula and am responsible for making sure teachers have the professional learning they need to carry out these initiatives.

As students returned to full-time in-person learning after the pandemic

closures, we knew we could not pick up where we left off. Teachers were overwhelmed by the number of initiatives in the district and unsure how to fit everything into the school day.

We recognized an ideal opportunity to rethink, revamp, and revitalize our key initiatives. We narrowed our focus and became more intentional about implementation, keeping the needs of our students and teachers at the forefront.

One initiative we kept was

Thinking Maps, a set of visual tools used across subject areas to support students' comprehension, critical thinking, and collaborative learning. With a refreshed emphasis on Thinking Maps, we aimed to extend its implementation and include a stronger emphasis on writing by implementing one of its advanced programs. Writing was a priority for us because it is tied so closely to comprehension across all content areas. We knew that students needed to be able to write to be successful in any school setting.

We also recommitted to Kagan Cooperative Learning Structures, a program that supports cooperative and student-directed learning. We selected this program as a core initiative because shifting ownership of learning to students enhances engagement, reduces behavioral issues, and improves comprehension.

We had seen good results in schools where Thinking Maps was implemented well, with higher program fidelity correlated with improved comprehension and writing skills. However, a combination of staff turnover and lack of leadership focus resulted in a loss of momentum. Originally introduced several years before, an analysis of its application revealed varied levels of professional learning quality and program fidelity throughout the district.

Throughout this process, we gained key insights that have bolstered our

success with initiative implementation. By applying the following 10 strategies, we successfully restored fidelity to Thinking Maps, Kagan Cooperative Learning, and a few other core initiatives and paved the way for a successful rollout of the writing program.

As a result, our teachers are not only more confident and enthusiastic about using the tools, they are seeing tangible results with students. Just one year after implementing the writing program, we are seeing significant improvement in our district benchmarks, with 36% of students increasing at least one proficiency level in writing and 22% of students increasing at least one proficiency level in math and English language arts. The lessons we learned are broadly applicable to change efforts with professional learning at the core.



### 1. Understand the “why” behind initiatives.

Before initiating or revisiting a district initiative, it is important to establish a collective commitment, particularly among the classroom teachers who will be implementing it. Starting with the “why” — clarifying the reasons the initiative was chosen

and how it is expected to benefit students and teachers — is critical to getting buy-in from teachers and school leaders.

For Thinking Maps and Kagan, I make sure professional learning starts with an overview of the brain research supporting these methods and a clear explanation of how the strategies complement student learning. When teachers understand how the new strategies will help their students, they are more excited to try them in the classroom.



### 2. Limit the number of initiatives.

Initiative overload is often a critical factor in the failure of initiatives. When new initiatives are piled on top of old ones, it leads to one of two outcomes: Older strategies and programs are discarded and replaced by something new, or teachers neglect to adopt the new initiatives, anticipating they will soon be replaced.

This often results in confusion among teachers regarding their roles and how different strategies and programs are intended to integrate. After the pandemic, our goal was to pare down the number of core initiatives across the district. Feedback from teacher surveys as well as direct

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observation in the classroom affirmed that this was the direction we needed to take.

The Thinking Maps and Kagan initiatives encompassed foundational strategies that would support teaching and learning throughout all grade levels and subject areas. By narrowing our focus, we can devote focused attention to each initiative, thereby increasing teacher engagement and overall success.



### 3. Set clear goals.

Once initiatives are chosen, it's important to set clear, measurable goals. What goals are we setting for our teachers and students? How will the initiatives help to achieve these goals?

In Maricopa, raising writing scores was one of our primary objectives. We also wanted to give teachers practical classroom strategies to increase reading comprehension and critical thinking. As a former instructional coach, I wanted to give our teachers tools that would help them better meet the diverse learning needs of our students.

For each initiative, it was important to define clear expectations for implementation: where and how they would be applied, their intended purposes, and the outcomes we expected.



### 4. Get leaders on board.

Principals and school leaders set the expectations and tone for teachers in their schools and are integral in modeling and reinforcing the adoption of districtwide initiatives. For a sustainable implementation, it is important that all district instructional leaders, including the superintendent,

support and fully understand the initiative.

After the pandemic, program evaluations highlighted the crucial role leadership plays in sustaining any initiative. At that time, teachers were requesting additional support from leaders in implementing core initiatives. To do this, we needed our principals to be involved in the same professional learning opportunities that teachers engaged in so that they could provide an additional layer of coaching and be able to properly recognize, evaluate, and reinforce the strategies during classroom walk-throughs.

As part of our Thinking Maps reboot, we engaged school and district leaders in leadership professional learning. This included an explanation of the strategies, the brain research behind them, and how they would be implemented.

The leaders were also given rubrics to help them evaluate the implementation in walk-throughs and ways that they could use Thinking Maps in their leadership roles. Our superintendent participated in the sessions, asked great questions, and emphasized the importance of this program.

This hands-on involvement by district and school leaders not only aids in maintaining the integrity and fidelity of the initiative but also helps them to support teachers throughout and following the implementation process. Getting leadership on board transforms an initiative from a directive into a shared priority. School and district leaders now regularly use Thinking Maps in their own jobs to support communication, collaboration, and consensus building among staff.



### 5. Strengthen professional learning.

When planning the reboot, we evaluated teachers' professional

learning needs. Although some teachers still used Thinking Maps, we found that implementation was uneven. Some of the professional learning facilitators from the original rollout were still on staff, but it became clear that most of them were not up to date on the latest methodologies.

Together with other district leaders, I assessed professional learning sessions to evaluate their consistency and effectiveness. We discovered significant variations in how learning providers — academic coaches, members of the academic services department, and teacher leaders — communicated the core purposes or the “why” and the neuroscience behind the strategies.

As a result, all professional learning facilitators engaged in a comprehensive relearning program. We created a new, standardized professional learning protocol to implement across all schools. We also identified and developed new teacher leaders, ensuring that each school had at least two up-to-date professional learning facilitators on-site.

District instructional coaches also participated in the new relearning program. Moving forward, these providers will conduct formal professional learning for new staff and lead an annual multiweek rollout process at each school designed to reinforce the strategies for teachers and students. Similarly, for our writing program, these facilitators conducted all teacher professional learning, ensuring a districtwide uniformity in delivery and approach.



### 6. Build in ongoing coaching and mentoring.

Ongoing coaching and mentoring are necessary to sustain any long-term initiative. Research has been clear that “one-and-done” programs do

not lead to sustained, transformative change. That's why Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) stress the importance of sustained models of professional learning tailored to specific teacher needs and contexts.

At Maricopa, the professional learning model ensures that all teachers have access to a certified professional learning facilitator at their school for questions and support as they apply the strategies they have learned in their classrooms.

Teacher leaders and instructional coaches provide modeling and lead collaboration sessions where teachers share ideas and ask questions. Coaches and other members of the academic services department conduct regular classroom walk-throughs, with an emphasis on first-year teachers and those who seem to be struggling with the strategies.

During these walk-throughs, they provide feedback and assistance and can even conduct model lessons. The district also offers ongoing professional learning to refresh knowledge and deepen learning.

A key lesson I've learned is that I can't be the primary instructional leader for all 11 schools in our district. It is important to have teacher leaders and school administration at each site to offer ongoing coaching, feedback, and modeling and provide targeted assistance to teachers at each school.

I rely heavily on our instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and school leaders to provide day-to-day support. Adding this layer of leadership support, which was lacking previously, has helped to dramatically increase teacher acceptance and program fidelity.



### 7. Use observations and walk-throughs to assess progress.

I'm a big believer in walk-throughs

and classroom observation as a strategy for sustainable transformation. Walk-throughs allow principals, coaches, and other instructional leaders to gauge how teachers are feeling about the initiative and look for observational evidence of the implementation.

For our chosen initiatives, we see evidence in the form of student-created learning materials posted on walls and in hallways, students successfully applying the strategies for learning in the classroom, and teachers integrating the strategies into their daily lesson plans.

The rubrics from the leadership professional learning provide clear, measurable things to look for at the student, teacher, and whole-school level. This allows us to see where each teacher and school is on the implementation continuum. Based on this observation data, we can determine where additional professional learning and coaching are needed and how to better support our teachers.



### 8. Address areas of resistance.

Every implementation will encounter areas of resistance. Some teachers will embrace new ideas and strategies more easily than others. Our first strategy was to shore up the most enthusiastic supporters. Seeing other teachers have success with new strategies will inspire their peers.

While consistency and fidelity are important in any schoolwide initiative, it is important to build in flexibility, allowing teachers to find what works best in their individual classrooms. However, it is also important to listen to teachers who are having trouble applying the strategies within their context and provide targeted support that addresses their concerns.

During the initial rollout of Thinking Maps, we noticed some resistance, particularly among our

secondary math teachers, who found it challenging to adapt the strategies to their specific teaching contexts. To solve this problem, I asked one of the math instructional coaches to develop targeted professional learning specifically on how to use the strategies with math and how they align with the essential standards the math teachers must address.

It's also important to look for areas of success and share those with other teachers. For example, we have a precalculus teacher who embraced the strategies in her classroom and whose students were experiencing success. This inspired others, which led to a curiosity about what she was doing that worked. Teachers need to see examples of how it is working for others in their discipline.



### 9. Be prepared to pivot and adjust.

Even when things are going well, you have to be prepared to pivot and adjust. You may see shifts in mandates, standards, the addition of curriculum, and evolving testing requirements. The needs of students may also change over time as demographics shift, or the impacts of other programs and initiatives might create a need to change course.

Instructional leaders must stay flexible and respond to the developing needs of students and teachers. Regular walk-throughs and review of district data will help leaders identify when a change is needed.



### 10. Celebrate successes.

Success breeds success. To sustain any district initiative, you must recognize and celebrate those who are doing it well. Recognizing the high-

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quality work of individual teachers and exemplary whole-school examples and communicates the examples you want others to follow.

I keep track of feedback I receive on our initiatives and actively look for positive examples to acknowledge on our walk-throughs. In front of my desk, I have a bulletin board where I post positive feedback and examples to remind me why we are doing what we are doing. It also gives me a ready source of great ideas to share with others.

Moreover, we celebrate quantitative data. For example, a Response to Intervention math teacher observed an 18% increase in proficiency in a unit she was teaching

after implementing the strategies. In writing, we saw a districtwide marked improvement between the fall and winter benchmark assessments after implementing the new writing program.

We celebrate accomplishments like these in governing board meetings during the superintendent's report and in school spotlight presentations to the board, in which student presenters share examples of district initiatives with governing board members.

By employing these 10 strategies, we have not only revitalized our commitment to key programs and strategies but also created a robust framework for sustaining districtwide education initiatives. Focusing on a

select group of core initiatives and nurturing them through these practices allows us to maximize impact for both students and teachers. Collaborative, ongoing, job-embedded educator learning, along with buy-in at the leadership level, has been instrumental to our success.

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