



NEWSLETTER

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9 **HARD THINGS** *to Do* *in Order to* **SUSTAIN** *School Reform*

For our June newsletter, The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement invited ANN CHAFIN to share her thoughts and ideas about sustaining school reform. Chafin, chief of Program Improvement and Family Support Branch of the Maryland State Department of Education, was a speaker at the annual Institute for CSR State Coordinators held May 9–10 in Washington, D.C. The Center sponsored the two-day event for coordinators to explore ways to create and maintain high-quality CSR programs as well as sustain comprehensive reform over time, and to make connections with other school improvement efforts.

EDUCATORS OFTEN SAY that schools should sustain reform without realizing that the expression is somewhat of an oxymoron. While the phrase is not on the level of “jumbo shrimp,” one can’t really hold or stay change. I think what we mean by sustaining reform is that we want to support all the good things that are going on in schools and not pull back from them. We want schools to solidify gains while pushing for more improvement. At times, it also means that we have done everything that’s cheap and easy, and now it’s time to do the things that are expensive and hard.

Following are nine statements for educators to consider when they face the hard work of sustaining school reform. It’s important to remember that no one person can address all of the issues. I hope educators find in the list their role or the place where they have the power to create change and help students.



Parents should not be just volunteers; they should be partners in the education of their children.

1. *It's easy to gather data; it's hard to use data.*

Schools have become very good at gathering data. We have lots and lots of data. But when will we move from gathering data to using data?

Schools need to do a much better job of using assessment data to help students learn. Think of it this way: Administering a test is a lot like taking someone's temperature; it provides a piece of data that describes what students know and are able to do. But what good is that if teachers don't use the information? Just taking someone's temperature doesn't make him or her well.

Like many students, educators spend too much time complaining that state and district exams are too hard or don't cover the right material. Such excuses are almost never true. I remember people kept saying our students did not do well on the Maryland School Performance Program assessment because the test was bad. That wasn't true. The reason that our students did not do well is that they didn't know the answers to the questions. It's not because they couldn't do it. We educators simply had not focused our instruction on what was being tested.

But we should not use data, especially information about a student's background, to make excuses about student performance. We might not be able to do anything about a student's family. We can't make a child get new parents. We can't make sure a student's mom earns a GED. But we can teach them. That's what we should focus on rather than creating excuses for why students can't learn.

2. *It's easy to have volunteers; it's hard to have real parent involvement.*

When my oldest daughter started kindergarten, I wanted to get involved. I was a really gung-ho

parent. I had a master's degree plus 30 credit hours, and I was ready to go. When the school sent home a list of things parents could do, I found the only thing I was qualified for was to shop for snacks.

Parents should not be just volunteers; they should be partners in the education of their children. Maryland's Parent Advisory Council has developed some recommendations for fostering more meaningful family-school interaction, such as suggesting that parents of students currently enrolled in Maryland schools serve on the state board of education or that the evaluations of teachers and principals have a component related to successful parent involvement. The group also recommends that schools train parents on ways to help their children succeed academically and train school staff on how to open the school to real family involvement.

3. *It's easy to do staff development; it's hard to develop staff.*

Teachers don't need the sage-on-the-stage staff developers; they need on-the-job, ongoing professional development. They need instructors who will get into the classroom with them and help them teach. When I worked in a school district, I would tell members of my professional development team that they should create an individualized learning plan for each instructor. Every teacher requires something different to help him or her meet the needs of students. We all approve of differentiating instruction for students, but sometimes we lose sight of that practice with our teachers and administrators.

4. *It's easy to focus on teaching; it's hard to focus on learning.*

I was in a faculty lounge when one teacher told a second teacher about how Johnny didn't know his long "e" sounds. The second teacher asked,



“So, how well does he read?” The first teacher replied, “Oh, he reads just fine. He just doesn’t know his phonics.”

This teacher lost sight of the learning, and we can’t afford do that. We need to always keep an eye on the learning, not the teaching. If we are not learning facilitators, then we are not doing what we are supposed to do.

Have you ever tried to talk with someone who speaks a foreign language? The first time you speak to them, it doesn’t work. So you try again, but speak louder. The third time, you speak even louder, and this time you enunciate very clearly. This is what we sometimes do with instruction. Teachers try a strategy, and it doesn’t work. Then they try the same strategy a second time and a third time. It still doesn’t work. We need to move beyond just giving our teachers data on what needs to be done and start giving them training on when to switch instructional strategies. And we need to help them develop a whole basket of teaching strategies from which to pick.

5. *It’s easy to remediate; it’s hard to accelerate.*

I once evaluated 20 school plans about creating success for all students, and without fail, every plan listed practice sheets, computer-assisted drills, and homework clubs for the at-risk children, while accelerated students were put into more interactive, learning-for-learning’s-sake courses like “fun with science” and “math enrichment.”

We need to flip these programs. Gifted children are often the ones who need to be taught how to do their homework, and the at-risk students don’t know that math can be fun. We need to teach the at-risk students how to enjoy science and math.

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6. *It’s easy to direct and manage; it’s hard to lead.*

We need to demand more of our leaders. We all know when we work with true leaders, when we work for people we admire. We also know when we are being managed, and there is no vision in the building.

Yet good leadership can come in many forms. Consider the following anecdote: One school was assigned a new principal who didn’t know a lot about instruction. But this man loved children; he knew the name of every student in his school. He also loved parents; he would go to spaghetti dinners every night of the week if he could. On his staff was an instructional specialist who knew instruction up one side and down the other. And he trusted her. This school’s scores rose from the lowest math quarterly scores for Title I schools to the highest quarterly math scores of any elementary school in the district.

7. *It’s easy to make a testimonial; it’s hard to conduct an evaluation.*

We always have to zoom out and ask: “Is what we’re doing working?” Being able to say “Everybody loved that activity! Everybody was involved!” does not constitute a sufficient evaluation of a program, class, or lesson. Some teachers still spend a whole week putting together that elementary school volcano experiment because the students love it, but as far as I know, papier-mâché is not one of our learning outcomes. A basic, clear evaluation would prevent continuing activities that do not contribute to learning.

8. *It's easy to assign blame; it's hard to solve problems.*

Assignment of blame is not a step in problem solving. When you finish deciding whose problem it is, you still have the same magnitude of problem. Educators and families need to stop pointing fingers and start cooperating with each other in order to raise student achievement. It's only by working together that we can solve the problems that our students are facing.

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9. *It's easy to talk about "those kids;" it's hard to talk about "our kids."*

Policymakers, educators, and community members need to understand that there are no "those kids" whose responsibility is someone else's. We have to get to the point where all kids are "our kids." In fact, "those kids" could be taking your blood pressure in a few years. Don't you want to invest in them? I do.

Ultimately, while school is true/false, life is all essay questions. If we are going to rededicate ourselves to education—not reform—but education, then we are going to have to do the hard things. Perhaps the hardest—and most rewarding—thing is to rededicate ourselves to the work of public education, every day. We have to be in it for the children.



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