Dealing With Resistance to Change

If you understand the various reasons that other educators resist change, you'll be more able to ease their resistance.

By Ronald Williamson and Barbara R. Blackburn

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We believe that one of the biggest roadblocks to addressing instructional rigor in schools is the resistance to change that is displayed by teachers, students, parents, and other building and district leaders. Every person deals differently with change. Some are more accepting, others more resistant.

No change is successful if the people being asked to change don't see its need. Change in schools must be based on improving students' educational experience, and the school culture must include a collective commitment to improvement and a parallel commitment to supporting people who take risks and make changes. Further, the school community must not accept failure as an option. Every student must be expected to learn, and the staff must be committed to supporting students in their learning.

Responding to Change

People respond to change in different ways. Some are early adopters and eagerly embrace innovations. Some will never adopt a change; nothing can get them to embrace the innovation. But most people can be moved toward support if given sufficient time and information.

We've found that people resist change for two primary reasons: they don't see the value of the change, or they are not sure that they will be successful with the change. Some of the most frequent concerns involve changing long-standing practices, such as grading or classroom organization.

Understanding the Resistance

Maslow described a hierarchy of needs that people experience. The hierarchy includes five stages and is a useful way to think about the feelings people

experience when changing school practices. He suggested that only when the lowest needs are attended to can people move to higher-order needs. Under stress, people may move to a lower level on the hierarchy. With support, they are able to move to higher levels.

The two lowest levels in Maslow's hierarchy are physical survival and security needs. For teachers, security needs might mean concerns about what they will be teaching or about having the knowledge and skills for success.

The next two levels in Maslow's hierarchy are the needs for belonging and esteem. Teachers might be concerned about whether they will be successful in changing their instruction or whether new norms about rigor will align with their own beliefs.

Finally, the highest level of the hierarchy is self-actualization, and teachers at this level need understanding and knowledge. Teachers at this level

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might want opportunities for professional growth. They may want to look at ways to plan a more rigorous classroom.

It's not just teachers who deal with the complexities of change, however. Changes in instruction will also affect students, families, and leaders. Some students may be uncertain about their ability to succeed if things change and may need greater support and more opportunities to revise and resubmit work.

Families may become uncertain about whether an emphasis on greater rigor will change family habits. Parents may not know how to respond if their children disagree with them about the importance of schoolwork. They may seek information about how to sup-

port their children's success and about how to provide support at home.

Principals and other school leaders may wonder about their ability to sustain efforts to improve rigor. They may question whether they have the knowledge and skills to work with their teachers, students and families to improve rigor.

Overcoming Resistance

The principal does not need to develop a vision alone; the most vibrant and lasting visions are shared ones. When working to improve the rigor of your school and classrooms, having a clear, concrete objective and explaining this goal to teachers and parents is one way to help overcome resistance. Some examples of clear, concrete objectives are:

- Teachers will use more analysis and synthesis questions with students
- Students will be able to describe ways that they are supported in their work
- Students, teachers, and families can discuss ways that student work samples have changed
- Teachers can explain how classroom routines have been modified to provide time for students to revise and resubmit work.

A second strategy for dealing with resistance is to continually focus and refocus the conversation. It is very easy to become distracted by personal agendas. All too frequently, we've heard issues portrayed as affecting students when in fact they were issues that affected a teacher or a group of teachers.

For example, at a recent workshop about developing a remediation plan for at-risk students, two teachers began to argue about classroom space and their own scheduling needs. The

two continued to bicker for some time until the principal reminded everyone that the purpose of the remediation classes was to positively affect student learning for their neediest students. By reframing the conversation, the group was able to move beyond the teachers' personal agendas.

It is important to always keep your vision about change and about how to improve rigor in your school at the forefront of any conversation. A strategy that we have used when working with schools on planning projects is to begin every meeting by reviewing the school's vision. We include the vision in the PowerPoint presentation and make it one of the first things that each group does. Each group is instructed, "Take a minute and read the vision statement. Think about how that statement can guide our work today."

It Starts and Ends With Me

During the last decade, there has been a significant shift in accountability in schools. School staff members share a collective accountability for the success of their students, and every individual shares a personal responsibility and accountability for doing whatever it takes to ensure student success.

Ultimately, it all starts and ends with each individual's personal vision for his or her school or classroom; commitment to making the changes to ensure greater rigor; and willingness to take risks, support one another, work collaboratively, and abandon long-standing practices that are not successful. **PL**