

# Tools FOR SCHOOLS

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## 4 KEY STRATEGIES

help educators  
overcome resistance  
to change



By Anthony Armstrong

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When principals Dot Schoeller and Mike Starosky needed to make dramatic changes in their schools, they both had different goals to achieve, but used similar strategies to implement sustainable schoolwide change.

Schoeller, currently principal at Jenkins Elementary, Lawrenceville, Ga., had previously taken over another elementary school that hadn't made Adequate Yearly Progress and was recovering from the recent suicide of its principal. In addition to turning the school around while staff members were still in an emotionally sensitive state, she needed to implement an inclusive education model to end the isolation of individualized education plan (IEP) students and English language learners (ELL). Schoeller created a coaching model that brought IEP and ELL teachers into the general education classrooms to collaborate and co-teach.

Use the tools on pp. 4-7 to implement lasting change.

Six years later, student scores almost doubled on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills from 38 to 71, the number of gifted students doubled, and 55% of the students exceeded the state standards. Schoeller's school was the only Title I school in the top seven of her county, and she attributes her success to the many smaller changes she made, including instructor collaboration, small student groups, and an inclusive education model applied to both IEP and gifted students.

Starosky's changes started with implementing high-quality professional learning communities (PLCs) at Whitman Middle School, Seattle, Wash. As a member of Learning Forward's Learning School Alliance, Starosky knew that professional learning communities would help improve students' success as well as create a channel for other planned changes, such as implementing distributed leadership and overhauling how they handled IEP students. He began by transforming his school's professional learning system. "We had to look at how to conduct our professional

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**COVER STORY** Change strategies*Continued from p. 1*

learning, what the staff was currently doing, and what high-quality PLCs do,” said Starosky. “Now, our teachers see the benefits and they don’t like it when their PLC time is cut.”

**\*2****ADDRESS RESISTANCE TO CHANGE**

Those who have tried to implement lasting change can attest that it is a complicated process. Numerous studies, theories, and books on the change process have flourished within the last 20 years. “Change is a science now,” said Shirley Hord, educational consultant and scholar laureate for Learning Forward. “We have studied it for over 40 years and know a great deal about it.”

While change itself is a complicated process, a review of change literature reveals four basic stages that help innovators preemptively reduce the amount of resistance encountered and provide ongoing frameworks for preventing and overcoming resistance: build trust, create a clear vision, ensure a strong and consistent implementation, and support the change with consistent follow-through.

**BUILD TRUST**

Educators and authors often cite trust as a critical ingredient for building cooperation and buy-in. For Starosky, giving others the opportunity to provide input is important for building trust. Staff meetings often begin with staff writing and reflecting individually, then discussing the topic within small groups, with someone from each group sharing their main ideas or concerns. Starosky gives staff “exit tickets” to write down opinions or concerns that help inform teams and committees; he also surveys the staff and local community to avoid becoming isolated. For example, when identifying new elective classes, Starosky used surveys to see which electives parents wanted. Starosky made changes based on parent input and ultimately encountered no resistance, a success he attributes to proactively reaching out to the community.

**Learning Forward  
BELIEF**

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

Other strategies for building trust include open communication, developing a coalition to help lead the changes (Kotter, 2010), avoiding manipulation, demonstrating a willingness to compromise, sharing ownership of the

change, and building a reputation for integrity (Bruckman, 2008, pp. 215-217).

**CREATE A CLEAR CHANGE VISION**

During this stage, innovators can establish a clear message that creates a sense of urgency and establishes a direction for the change (Kotter, 2010).

Schoeller likened her changes to an airplane headed for the ski slopes. “If anyone was on my plane and wanted to go to the beach, they were on the wrong plane,” Schoeller said. “I told them that if they didn’t want to teach using the inclusive collaborative model, they weren’t necessarily bad teachers, they were just going in a different direction.”

Reaching out to the community when developing a clear vision has become a regular part of Starosky’s planning cycle. Currently, Starosky and his staff are planning changes with school discipline policies. “We all have completely different views on discipline,” said Starosky of the faculty, parents, and community. “So we are reading the same book together to come up with answers.” Currently, he has four book-study meetings planned with the parent-teacher organization.

**Principal Dot Schoeller:**

“I told them that if they didn’t want to teach using the inclusive collaborative model, they weren’t necessarily bad teachers, they were just going in a different direction.”

**\*3****ENSURE A STRONG AND  
CONSISTENT IMPLEMENTATION**

Once lead innovators and their teams have crafted a change vision, they disseminate their message consistently through multiple channels of communication and through their actions (Kotter, 2010). Delivery should also include specific strategies for implementing change (Fullan, 2001, p. 18). According to Hord, implementation strategies can include professional learning, how often it will be provided, and what resources, equipment, and materials will be available. “Implementers also need to know they will have plenty of time for the implementation,” added Hord. “They must be given time to make changes. Change doesn’t happen in a day, month, or even a year.”

Implementation of the vision may result in a loss of staff. Schoeller saw 68 teachers transfer out of her school the first two years; however, change leaders advise educators to not let a fear of loss or dissent stifle discussions of proposed changes. Often, resistant voices offer valuable insights and learning opportunities (Fullan, 2001, p. 41; Kotter & Whitehead, 2010, p. 88).

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**COVER STORY** Change strategies

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Starosky ensured consistent and clear implementation by communicating the change message to staff verbally and in newsletters. Change leaders also went to grade-level team meetings to address their concerns, talk about issues, model behaviors, develop teacher support, and problem-solve.

**SUPPORT WITH FOLLOW-THROUGH**

Once changes are under way, continue to use actions to build credibility and ensure the staff that change efforts are not temporary (Bruckman 2008, p. 216). Innovators can continue to make small, successful changes and celebrate those successes (Kotter, 2010).

To help ensure the ongoing stability of the changes, Schoeller modified the school's professional development program to reward teachers for working with coaches, demonstrating implementation, and raising test scores.

For Starosky, follow-up and ongoing support and problem solving were critical. "The idea of what the change is going to look like and the reality of the result can be very different," said Starosky. "So it is helpful to follow up regularly to see what unanticipated problems arise and collectively discuss the problem."

Starosky also uses a data-driven approach to drive a cycle of continuous improvement with the professional learning communities. "We use our PLCs and administration teams to look at students through lenses of equity to problem solve for specific students, grade levels, and content areas," said Starosky. "We can look at what works with the students and explore where teachers struggle."


**BIGGEST CHALLENGES**

The biggest challenges Schoeller and Starosky faced in implementing change both required internal reflection.

Schoeller recognized that she needed to work on making everyone comfortable with telling her the truth about the changes. "People wanted to please me so bad, they wouldn't tell me the truth," said Schoeller.

Starosky cited the need to remain open and trusting as a leader. "You can't assume you have all the right answers," he reflected. "Do your homework so you know as many sides of the issue as possible. Trust that people have the same end result in mind and want what's best for kids."

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**Read more about**

overcoming resistance to change using the stages of concern and the Concerns-Based Adoption Model in *Implementing Change: Patterns, Principles, and Potholes* by Gene E. Hall & Shirley M. Hord (Pearson, 2011).

**Learn more using Learning Forward's archives**

When introducing a new change in your school, scholar laureate Shirley Hord offers these tips.

1. Use **data** to establish a need and create a sense of urgency. Be sure to first celebrate where students and teachers are doing well before scrutinizing where the results need improvement.
2. Use the **stages of concern** at the beginning of and throughout the change effort to read people's feeling on change and to provide support and assistance to help them address those feelings.
3. Use **Innovation Configurations** to illustrate what the change will look like. Principals, administrators, coaches, and teachers can use these to determine what the change will look like once it is put in place.

You can learn more about each of these tips by visiting Learning Forward's complete archive of publications ([www.learningforward.org/news/journalsearch.cfm](http://www.learningforward.org/news/journalsearch.cfm)), or Learning Forward's bookstore at ([www.learningforwardstore.org](http://www.learningforwardstore.org)), and searching for the phrases in bold above.



TOOL

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**Encountering resistance**

Some common types of resistance encountered by professional developers



**Aggressive resistance.** This is the easiest type to identify, because it's overt and no effort is made to disguise the refusal to change.

For example, a colleague confronts a lead teacher with: "Under no circumstances will I participate in another curriculum committee. Let someone else do the work."

**Passive-aggressive resistance.** In these cases, staff members appear willing to change, but change never materializes. It's common to hear people say, "I'll be glad to lend a hand as soon as I finish this paper work," or "I'll try clear my schedule so I can attend the conference."

Unfortunately, the paperwork never ends, the calendar is never cleared, and "try" never becomes "will." Meanwhile, support for an initiative slowly erodes.

Phantom obstacles are also common: For example,

teachers may express interest in working with a university professor to explore new math teaching strategies, but then back away from change by claiming that "parents don't like us experimenting with the way we teach."

**Passive resistance.** This looks like wholehearted acceptance until action fails to take place. Staff members willingly discuss change, and may in fact seem enthusiastic, but never follow through.

This is the most difficult form of resistance to detect because it's subtle and sounds supportive. All too often, staff developers hear exclamations of "sounds great," "count me in," and "let's do it" in meetings, only to discover weeks later that action failed to materialize.

**Excerpted from:** Janas, M. (1998, Spring). Shhhhh, the dragon is asleep and its name is Resistance. *Journal of Staff Development*, 19(3).

## 10 Things To Do About Resistance

Everybody is at least a little resistant to change. They wonder how it will affect them daily and in the long-term. There are ways to overcome resistance, though.

### 1. Acknowledge change as a process.

Change is not an event but an ongoing process. Remember that it may take years from goal-setting to stable results. Conflict and resistance are natural processes and not signs of failure.

### 2. Empower stakeholders.

To get the most cooperation, stakeholders must be included as decision makers. If meeting individual needs is part of the plan, resistance is less likely. Empowering people means creating mechanisms that provide them with genuine authority and responsibility. To minimize discord, the change process should be guided by negotiation, not by issuing demands.

### 3. Encourage all stakeholders.

Stakeholders must be active, invested participants throughout the change process. Setting up opportunities for individuals and groups to vent concerns can be effective. Being heard is fundamental in establishing understanding and consensus.

### 4. Set concrete goals.

Set goals by consensus, creating a broad sense of ownership. This step is critical because stakeholders will be able to return to a shared agenda when there are missteps. This makes it easier to refocus.

### 5. Be sensitive.

Everyone needs respect, sensitivity, and support as they work to redefine their roles and master new concepts. Managing conflict means being aware of differences among individuals. Each stakeholder must genuinely feel valued throughout the change process.

### 6. Model process skills.

Teach by demonstrating the appropriate skills and actions. Trainers may find that reflecting publicly and in a straightforward manner on their own doubts and resistance may help others.

### 7. Develop strategies for dealing with emotions.

Educators often focus on outcomes, neglecting the emotions that can go with change. Focus on such questions as: How will our lives be different? How do we feel about the changes? Is there anything that can or should be done to honor the past before we move on?

### 8. Manage conflict.

Ideally, change is a negotiated process. Stakeholders should be invited to negotiate issues that may cause resistance. For example, an assistant principal may need to negotiate the needs of the whole school with faculty members more concerned with departmental priorities.

### 9. Communicate.

Talk, write memos, e-mail. Open communication is a necessity. It can move concerns out of the shadows so they can be resolved. Try focusing on reflective questions such as: Where are we in the process? Where are we headed?

### 10. Monitor process dynamics.

The constant interplay between groups involved in the change must be monitored and the appropriate adjustments must be made. Begin evaluations when the change process is being developed and continue throughout. Ongoing evaluations of progress are essential.

**Source:** "Shhh, the Dragon Is Asleep and Its Name Is Resistance," by Monica Janas, *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 1998 (Vol. 19, No. 3). Available online at [www.nsdc.org/library/jsd/janas193.html](http://www.nsdc.org/library/jsd/janas193.html).

“The main

dangers in this

life are the

people who

want to change

everything ... or

nothing.”

— Lady Nancy Astor