

Resistance to Change in Schools: the Perspectives of Parents, Teachers, and School Administrators

A stagnant school is a failing school. In contrast, a healthy school has a growth mindset. A flourishing school is one that is always evolving — adapting to new students, addressing new challenges, building the faculty culture, updating facilities, improving efficiency in operations, and more.

As institutions change, people must adapt. While most educators can identify specific areas in which their *schools* need to change, they may not like being asked to consider their own commitment to progress and growth. In the widely quoted words of Peter Senge, “People don’t resist change; they resist being changed.”

Sometimes resistance to change comes from people who believe that you as the leader are not prepared. They think your plan is ill-conceived, that you haven’t thought through all the ramifications, and that the whole project will collapse under its own weight or will run out of money. Are they right? Be honest with yourself; listen to your critics. If you need to go back to the planning stage, it’s better to do that before trying to implement changes among people who actually do know better.

But if you have done all the preparatory work and you are ready to roll out a change that will affect the whole school or a significant part of it, consider the following obstacles.

Parents

Parents are important stakeholders in any proposed changes that affect students. Their perspectives and concerns must be considered and addressed.

Typical parental concerns include:

- **Nostalgia.** Many private-independent schools have rich histories replete with unique traditions. Parents often want their children to share in these experiences.
- **Fear of the unknown.** Parents know that their children thrive on stability, so they are likely to be cautious about changes that disrupt familiar routines.
- **Lack of communication.** When teachers or administrators announce changes summarily, without engaging parents, listening to them, and addressing their concerns, parents naturally offer resistance.
- **Protection of their children’s interests.** Motivated by a desire to ensure the best possible education for

their children, parents are naturally apprehensive about changes they perceive will compromise their children’s learning. These parents may not be aware of the way teaching and learning methods have evolved, or they may be suspicious of what they perceive to be unproven educational trends.

The solutions to most of these concerns are straightforward.

- **Transparent communication.** Schools must actively engage with parents, offering two-way channels of communication. When changes are proposed, schools should communicate through multiple platforms, such as e-mail, newsletters, videos, podcasts, in-person forums, and one-on-one meetings, as appropriate.
- **Parental involvement.** Rather than announcing changes as pronouncements from on high, schools should involve parents in decision-making when possible. The “why” behind the changes should be communicated. In some situations, it can be beneficial to share the changes with parent group leaders so they can support the change initiative once it is formally announced. Parents will need to be reminded how the school is adapting to the changing needs of students and society.
- **Engaged listening.** Giving parents a venue to air their concerns openly can ensure that administrators and faculty are not missing something important and in turn can enable parents to feel heard and validated.
- **Convincing the skeptics.** Parents must ultimately be comfortable and confident that proposed changes are being made with their own child’s best interests in mind.

Teachers

Because teachers are the professionals who educate and mentor students, their perspectives are crucial when introducing changes at every level within the school. Resistance to change from teachers may stem from several concerns.

- **Workload.** Teachers are often overburdened, which can make them push back against “improved” methodologies, advanced educational technology, or changes in curricula. They naturally fear that changes will add to their responsibilities without saving them time or increasing their salary.
- **Fear of inadequacy.** Some teachers fear that new approaches, technologies, or methodologies will require

new proficiencies — perhaps new technological expertise — that they simply will not be able to master. This fear may stem from a perceived lack of training or support.

- **Attachment to traditional methods.** Experienced teachers are often comfortable with the teaching methods they have used for years. They may be resistant to change because they believe that these methods have served them well with generations of students. They may believe that changes may actually harm students or undermine their role as teachers.
- **Negative experiences.** Some teachers have been in their school long enough to have experienced more than one new administrator with new ideas that are never fully implemented and quickly fade away. These teachers will always be tempted to wait out the new initiative — next year, a new department chair or division leader will likely have another plan!

The solutions to these concerns revolve around professional development and collegial respect.

- **Professional development and support.** Professional development enhances teachers' skills and their confidence in implementing changes. When teachers cooperate in these professional development initiatives, they become ambassadors for the changes among their colleagues.

- **Collaboration and feedback.** Teachers are professionals who want their own expertise to be appreciated. When administrators provide opportunities for teachers to help plan for changes, evaluate the results, and share feedback before widespread mandatory implementation, these teachers become collaborators instead of opponents. It is essential, however, that the feedback loop be authentic — that decision-makers are actually listening and adjusting new programs as teachers provide reports of real-world results.
- **Clarity about process.** Confusion leads inevitably to foot-dragging. Administrators must be absolutely clear about what changes are being implemented, the purpose of those changes, and the timeline for implementation.
- **Motivation.** The Knoster Model for Managing Complex change, as adapted by ISM, suggests that vision, skills, incentives, resources, an action plan, and consent contribute to success in implementing complex change. By illuminating possible adverse reactions to change, the model can help leaders understand where more work is needed.

In particular, consider how teachers are incentivized to embrace changes that are being proposed. Teachers may be motivated by any number of “wells of motivation” — their commitment to the school's mission, money, time,

Managing Complex Change

Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	+	Consent	=	SUCCESS
X	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	+	Consent	=	CONFUSION
Vision	+	X	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	+	Consent	=	ANXIETY
Vision	+	Skills	+	X	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	+	Consent	=	RESISTANCE
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	X	+	Action Plan	+	Consent	=	FRUSTRATION
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	X	+	Consent	=	DIFFUSION
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	+	X	=	SABOTAGE

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student success, and more. But if proposed changes do not engage with any of these areas, teachers may offer resistance.

Administrators

School administrators are responsible for leading their staff and managing the school environment. They are often the drivers of change at their school. Yet even administrators can resist change — especially when their own turf is threatened. Why else might administrators hesitate?

- **Resource constraints.** Many changes are expensive — or they may promise long-term savings at a high up-front cost. Financial risk causes many administrators to cancel or delay necessary initiatives.
- **Angry parents and teachers.** When administrators anticipate resistance or hostility, they naturally seek ways to compromise and placate. This may lead to half-hearted implementation or endless pilot programs instead of full adoption of necessary changes.

The solution to resistance from administrators is planning — essentially, doing what they are paid to do.

- **Long-term planning.** School administrators must develop comprehensive, well-considered change management plans that explain why changes are necessary, clearly indicate how they will benefit students, consider potential challenges, and outline a clear roadmap for implementation. These plans should include teachers in the planning process and they must incorporate a communication plan addressing faculty, parents, students, alumni, and the wider community.
- **Resource allocation.** It is the responsibility of the leadership team and the Board to ensure that the necessary finances, technology, and professional development opportunities are available to support the proposed changes.
- **Aligning goals and incentives.** Administrators need incentives that encourage them to achieve significant goals. Well-considered plans and roadmaps with realistic timelines allow administrators, teachers, and parents alike to understand processes and expectations. As they achieve success in each step, they are energized to make further progress.

Boards, Heads, and other school leaders should always remember that the art of persuasion is one of their most important skills. Every group — students, parents, teachers, committees — will have both enthusiastic adopters and skeptics. Helping groups embrace change means engaging with those who are unsure without being bogged down by their resistance. It sometimes requires you to say, “I hear what you are saying; you make a good point. We will keep your reservations in mind as we move forward.”

ASK A CONSULTANT



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Some educators who “resist change” believe the proposed changes are ill-advised. For example, a teacher who opposes a new plan might say, “This is not going to be good for some of my students.” In essence, they’re questioning your judgment. What’s your response?

When a colleague is questioning your problem-solving approach, two things may be happening. First, they may have a legitimate alternative. A wise leader will listen and alter their approach, because whenever you can bring a teacher or another team member into a solution, everyone wins.

On the other hand, their objection may signify that this colleague doesn’t trust your leadership at all. When trust erodes, it can be very difficult to repair the situation, but a wise leader will listen carefully before reacting strongly. It may still be possible to help this team member see multiple sides of the issue.

In schools, parents pay the bills. If you are a Head proposing a significant change to your school, what do you do when a significant number of parents react with threats to withdraw their children?

Any substantial change that parents perceive negatively must be carefully managed from conception through implementation. Both to inform policy and to build goodwill, it’s often wise to include a parent voice and perspective from the outset. Before a decision is made, you’re looking for good advice and perhaps even a devil’s advocate. During the implementation, you’re looking for an influencer who can bring other parents along.

For instance, if your school is considering implementing a drug testing program for upper school students, include responsible and supportive parents from the very beginning of your conversations. Parents can help you understand the pros and cons of the decision, and then the same parents can help introduce the policy to the parent association and to grade-level parent volunteers.

Sometimes a school Head makes “change” their whole identity. “I’m a change agent,” they say. “The Board hired me to shake things up.” And perhaps because of their commitment to change, they might listen too little or move too fast. What do you say to that?

The most important presumption about any change is that it will improve the school and benefit the lives of its teachers and students. Therefore, the most important hope for any change is not how *quickly* it can be implemented but that, when implemented, it actually *achieves* its purpose and *sticks*. That is why effective leaders evaluate the mission and culture of a school before embarking on major change. Such awareness improves the likelihood that the change will work and will last.

“Managing change” is not binary, like turning a switch off or on. It’s more like driving a school bus without a map. You can go in any direction, at any speed, with any number of passengers. How should you react if parents or teachers say, “I’m not opposed to change, but you are going in the wrong direction, with the wrong people”? Or, “The direction is great, but accelerate more gently!”

Managing change means working with teachers who require predictability and support. And it means getting the buy-in of contemporary parents who often question authority. That’s why driving this school bus is a delicate dance requiring mission alignment, careful and regular listening and learning, and ultimately building a compelling and enthusiastic case for support for the change being proposed. Still, no change process will please everyone in a school community. It may still be disruptive and uncomfortable. Understanding, acknowledging, and respecting the reality of this discomfort helps to make change an honest and transparent process.

What happens when the Board and the Head are not aligned on change? If the Trustees want change, but the Head doesn’t agree, is there any hope for that relationship?

Any disagreement between the school Head and the Board must be handled through the Head Support and Evaluation process.¹ In this powerful relationship, the critical ingredients of trust, listening, and mutual respect must be present. The Board and Head can meaningfully engage in deep conversation, debating ideas and solutions. Within this relationship, there can be no operational secrets. In the end, if the Head and the Head Support and Evaluation Committee cannot agree on a way forward, that committee must make a final decision about the Head’s continuing relationship with the school.

¹ See “The School Head and the Head Support and Evaluation Committee: Centering on a Strategic Pathway,” *Ideas & Perspectives*, 45-9; “The School Head’s Expectations of the Head Support and Evaluation Committee,” *I&P*, 46-1.