



**D2L**

# **The Superintendent's Guide to Change Management**

Including advice and practical tips from superintendents  
who have led districtwide innovation.

# Table of Contents

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<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	
<b>TALKING ABOUT CHANGE AND HOW TO MANAGE IT EFFECTIVELY</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	
<b>WHAT IS CHANGE MANAGEMENT?</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b>	
<b>WHY DO SCHOOL DISTRICTS NEED AN EFFECTIVE CHANGE MANAGEMENT PROCESS?</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE</b>	
<b>ADAPT TO CIRCUMSTANCES AND FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>CHAPTER FOUR</b>	
<b>HOW TO IMPLEMENT A CHANGE MANAGEMENT PLAN</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>CHAPTER FIVE</b>	
<b>THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>CHAPTER SIX</b>	
<b>THE ART OF EMBRACING CHANGE</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	
<b>IS CHANGE ALWAYS GOOD?</b>	<b>27</b>





# Talking About Change and How to Manage it Effectively

There are two constants in life: change and resistance to change.

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People are **hardwired to resist change**. Part of the human brain interprets change as a threat to our safety and so releases fear hormones to physically protect ourselves. That's why so many people are reluctant to embrace innovation even when the rational part of their minds can understand its benefits. It could be a new technological tool that reduces administration time by half or a filing system that makes student grades more accessible—people will still tend to not embrace change. We are attracted to the idea of this future working environment where life is easier, but we reject the mechanics of how to make it a reality because we are comfortable with the status quo.

This aversion to change can negatively impact organizations, especially school districts where adaptation is essential to continually meet the needs of its students. We know that **most change programs fail to achieve their goals due to employee resistance and lack of management support**. So, while many initiatives make rational sense to everyone in the organization, you need your staff to champion them in order to get strong results.

In this guide, you have everything you need to know about change management, including what it is exactly, why it's important and how to implement a change management plan. We also interviewed superintendents across North America to learn more about how they've successfully led change across their school districts. For topics ranging from building a middle school with a reduced budget to not allowing nongraduates to walk across the graduation stage in order to boost exam performance, we were able to draw out the guiding principles of successful change management from the superintendent's perspective.

Read on to find out how you can encourage your staff to overcome the psychological cost of being too attached to the present so that your district can stay relevant and better serve its community.



# What Is Change Management?

Applying transition psychology to the work setting.

Change management is a systematic approach to dealing with the implementation of new processes or procedures across organizations. This usually requires a multistep plan that divides the project into manageable parts.

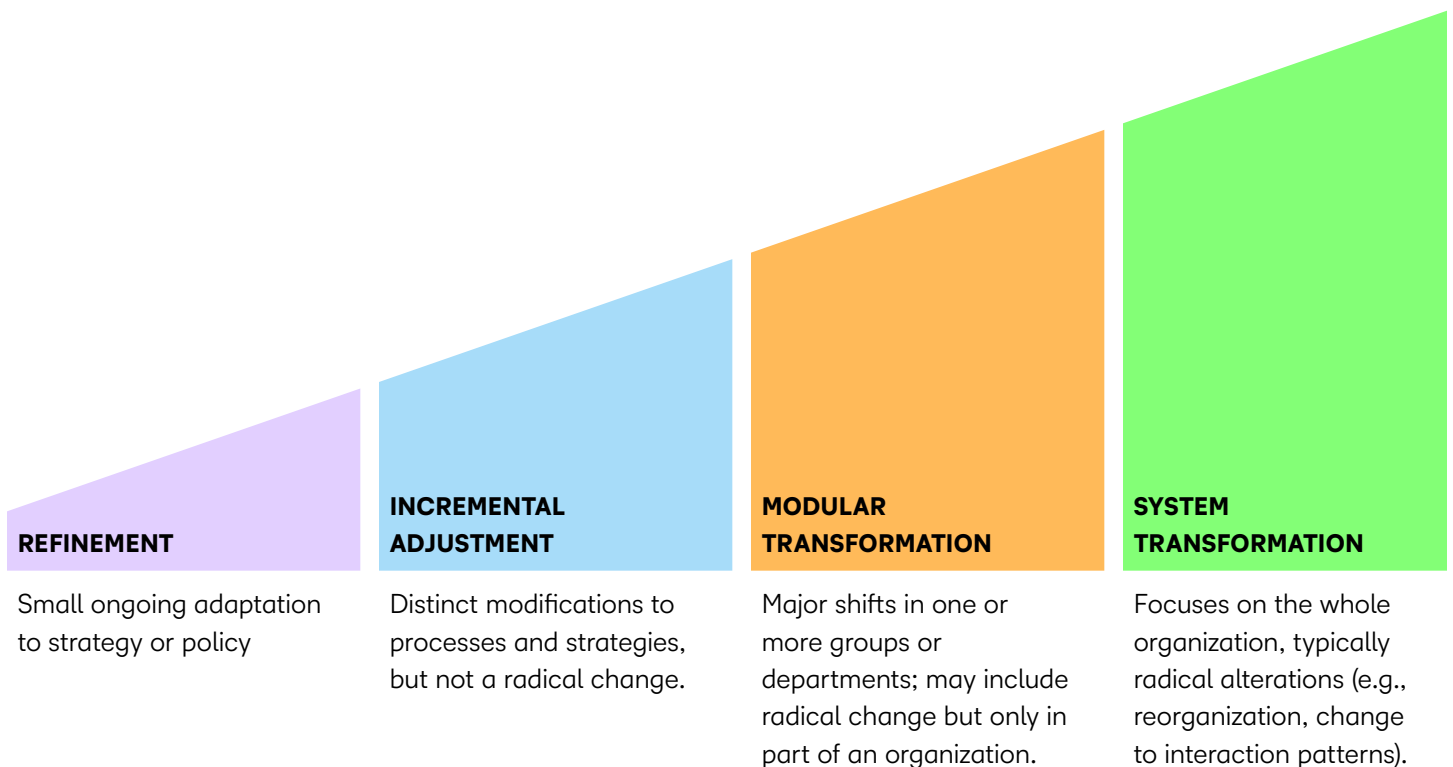
Here's an example of a change management plan:

1. Create a vision and plan for change.
2. Prepare your organization for change.
3. Implement the changes.
4. Give staff the support they need.
5. Embed the changes within your organization's culture and practices.
6. Review progress and analyze results.

## WHAT IS THE "CHANGE" IN CHANGE MANAGEMENT?

The change itself could range from a minor update in procedure that affects one group of staff to a complete process overhaul that changes the day-to-day lives of every employee.

In a school district, change management can aid the implementation of initiatives such as using a different grading tool, updating a learning management system or modernizing school curricula to meet new exam standards.



Source: "Organizational Change Management: A Critical View," by Rune Todnem

## CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Change management in education can involve pedagogy, administrative processes and technologies, or a combination of one or more of these areas.

### Examples where change management practices could be helpful:

<b>TEACHING PRACTICES</b> The ways in which educators understand and implement instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Elementary school teachers are asked to decrease their transition periods to keep students engaged.</li><li>• High school teachers are asked to add more “wait time” when they ask questions in order to give students more time to think of an answer.</li></ul>
<b>ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESS</b> The development, implementation, and evaluation of district and school systems and policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teachers are asked to submit their lesson plans every Friday so the principal can review them.</li><li>• The school buses depart from a middle school at 3:30pm instead of 3pm.</li></ul>
<b>TECHNOLOGY</b> How technology is used to facilitate learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A new video tool is being introduced and teachers learn how to use it so their students can submit video-based homework.</li><li>• All schools in the district move from one technology provider to another.</li></ul>

Transitions are delicate processes, and the most effective change management considers the human aspect of dealing with change. Change management plans therefore need to find a way to inspire employees to be champions of innovation.

The goal is not just to implement a new process or system, but instead to find a more efficient way of thinking where everyone understands the purpose and supports the new way forward.

Making long-lasting change is not just about the process itself but about the people involved in implementing the process. That’s why effective change management can be challenging, as it requires strategic planning, patience and persistence.

In the next chapter we’ll outline why it’s important for school districts to have effective change management processes.

#### THE HUMAN SIDE OF CHANGE

**70%** of change programs fail to achieve their goals because of employee resistance and lack of management support



## CHAPTER TWO

# Why Do School Districts Need an Effective Change Management Process?

Improving K-12 outcomes with a systematic approach to change.

District leaders are frequently tasked with increasing efficiency in schools and improving students' learning outcomes. They are responsible for driving forward transformation of systems and practices across the district where necessary, making high-level decisions that impact the lives of thousands of people.

This means superintendents are often leading their districts through periods of transition. Change management practices can help these transitions run more smoothly by empowering leaders with a deeper understanding of how to implement change, which also improves their confidence in their abilities to successfully carry change out. This is vital for increasing district leaders' career fulfillment, especially during a time when turnover among superintendents is the highest it's been in the past seven years.

**“We use considerable time and resources to train our school and district-level leaders in change management. If you’re a leader, you need to know how to navigate change successfully because there are so many moving parts to consider. You need a bird’s-eye view of the system you’re working within, but also a down-to-earth understanding of the needs of your staff and students.”**

Rick Surrency, Superintendent at Putnam County School District,  
Putnam County, Florida

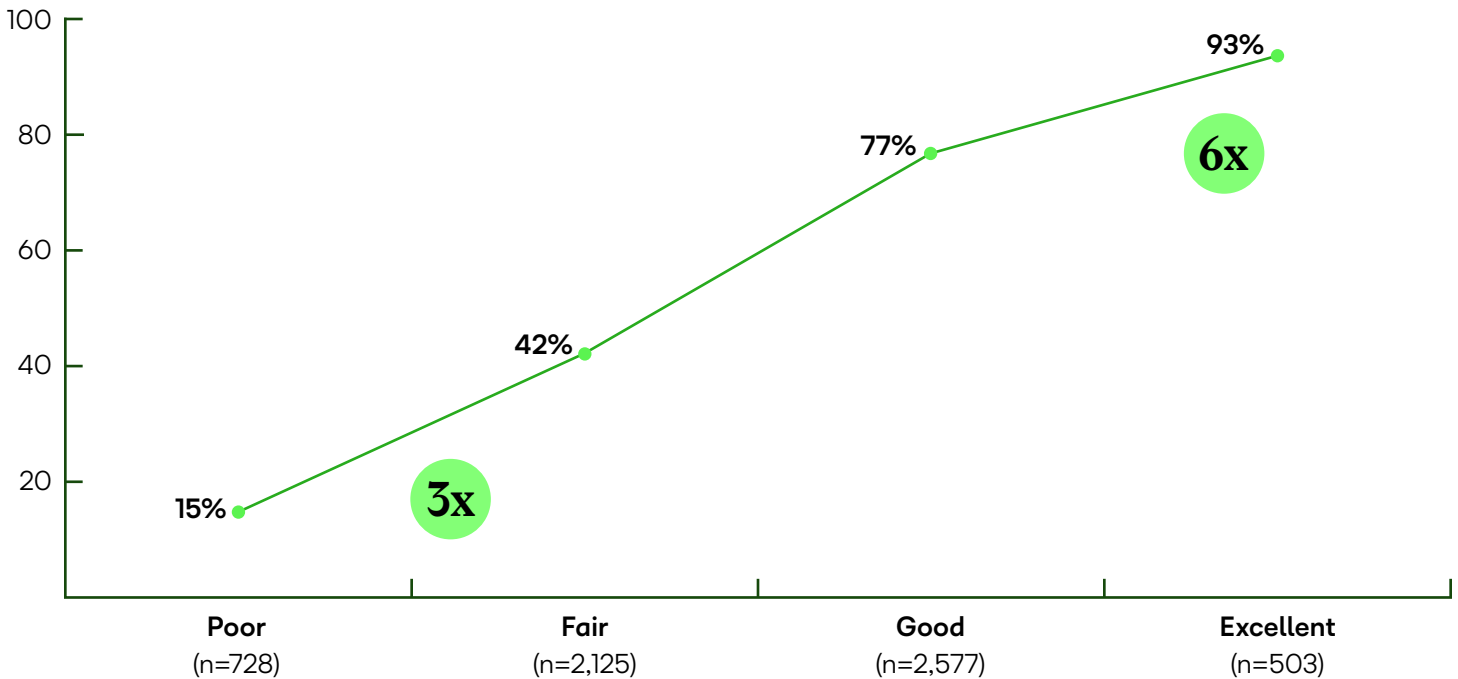
## CHANGE MANAGEMENT CAN BOOST DISTRICT PERFORMANCE

Studies show that projects with excellent change management are **six times more likely to meet objectives than those with poor change management.**

Clearly, the application of change management would improve district performance when you consider how much change superintendents oversee across K-12 schools. There is a continuous cycle of analyzing data, considering improvement strategies, implementing and monitoring those strategies, and assessing the results.

The upward trajectory of this graph shows that even poor change management can have a better impact on organizations than not applying any change management at all.

## Correlation of Change Management Effectiveness With Meeting Objectives



Source: Prosci Benchmarking Data from 2020, produced by Prosci

# The Unique Conditions of Managing Change at K-12 Public Schools

While some characteristics of public schools resemble those of other organizations, K-12 education is a unique industry with uncommon challenges.

## **EMOTIONS CAN RUN HIGH BECAUSE CHILDREN ARE INVOLVED**

K-12 education can be emotionally charged because decisions impact the lives of children. This means stakeholders can react to change in an intuitive way rather than use their reason and judgment.

**MEANINGFUL RESULTS OFTEN REQUIRE MONTHS (OR YEARS) TO SHOW**  
Changes can take months or years to manifest in tangible outcomes, making it easier to abandon change midstream.

In Florida, Rick Surrency is currently in his second four-year term as superintendent at Putnam County School District. “There’s only so much you can do in a four-year span of time. Having eight years gives you more time to see the results of an adjusted system. Those who expect to see immediate results are setting themselves up for failure.”

**TEACHER BURNOUT AND STAFF SHORTAGES PRESENT ISSUES**  
K-12 educators are more burnt out than workers in any other industry, and teachers continue to depart the profession in record numbers.

This makes implementing change more challenging, because schools are functioning at reduced capacity—partly due to the burnout staff are suffering from and also because it’s difficult to fill staff vacancies in many districts.

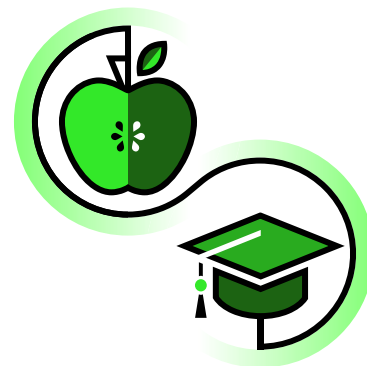
## **EVERYONE IS A STAKEHOLDER IN PUBLIC EDUCATION**

What happens inside schools affects not only the students and staff but also their surrounding communities. For example, the times school buses run influence local traffic. Local taxpayers can also exercise direct influence on school budgets. This can create an elevated sense of pressure, because the decisions superintendents make gain local attention.

In addition, most people have been to school at some point in their lives, and so are likely to have ideas and assumptions about how schools should be run. Change can therefore be difficult to create and maintain due to the diversity of viewpoints across the community.

Taking the unique aspects of K-12 public school into account will enable you to create an effective change management process to help your district reach its goals. We’ll get into the nuts and bolts of making a plan in chapter four.

In the next chapter, you can learn more about how Brooke Olsen-Farrell, superintendent at Slate Valley Unified School District in Fair Haven, Vermont, applied change management to opening a new middle school in her district. This middle school was a topic of discussion for over 30 years in the county, and Olsen-Farrell turned the idea into a reality after she joined as district leader in 2017.







## CHAPTER THREE

# Adapt to Circumstances and Focus on What You Can Control

How Brooke Olsen-Farrell, Superintendent at Slate Valley Unified School District, in Fair Haven, Vermont, opened a new middle school in a district suffering from change fatigue.



**BROOKE OLSEN-FARRELL**  
District School Superintendent  
Slate Valley Unified School  
District, Fair Haven, Vermont

Brooke Olsen-Farrell lives in Granville, New York, right across the border from her school district in Fair Haven, Vermont. Her career in education spans two decades, first teaching at her old high school in New York state and now working in Slate Valley as superintendent, where she is in her 10th year at the school district and sixth year as its leader.

It would be fair to describe Olsen-Farrell's recent change management style as crisis change management. After just a few months as superintendent, there was an attempted school shooting, and six months after that, COVID-19 emerged (ushering in statewide school closures), which was followed by two district mergers. Olsen-Farrell credits the Slate Valley community with resilience, especially regarding the averted shooting: "There's been a lot to adjust to. But we are now the leading district in the state of Vermont on school safety and a relative expert as a result of what we've been through."

One of Olsen-Farrell's major projects has been opening a new middle school. This was an idea that had been discussed for over 30 years within the community, and Olsen-Farrell and her team made it happen. She tells us in her own words how she guided her staff through the transitional period and continues to help them adapt to the challenges of widespread change.

## **DESPITE A REDUCED BUDGET, WE MANAGED TO OPEN A MIDDLE SCHOOL THIS FALL**

In March 2020, we had a design for a new middle school, and we put out a \$60 million bond to renovate the high school and to add a middle school to the high school campus. That vote was not successful—two-thirds of voters did not support the bond. However, shortly afterward, when COVID-19 forced schools to close, we were able to divert funds to the middle school without asking the community for a larger budget.

## **THIS MUCH-ANTICIPATED PROJECT REQUIRED THOUGHTFUL SCAFFOLDING**

I made sure we started talking about the new middle school in public board meetings to help people adjust to the idea that a change was going to happen. I also wanted to be as clear and compassionate in my communication as possible because the synergies of adding a new middle school to one of our current high schools meant a loss of staff positions.

Indeed, there were many aspects to consider during the planning stages. We had to be very thoughtful about what the years leading up to the school opening would look like, what the staffing pattern might be, and so on. And if we were hiring new people, it was important for us to be clear with them that they might only have a one- or two-year contract.

We knew that once the school was established within the high school, the current staff would have to adapt to several new things, such as new processes and having different staff and students around. So, getting those two groups of staff to interact with each other was something I organized so that they could build stronger relationships. That was challenging. But it was some of the most important work to do because those teachers are now running the school successfully because of the work they put in earlier in the year.

While this was happening, we went through a change in our leadership structure, and I wanted to make sure my new deputies got comfortable with their new roles as soon as possible. We met every Friday afternoon for about two years and would discuss what the transition needed to look like. We'd discuss several topics, such as how things need to be communicated to the staff and families. I made sure they felt like they were part of the decision-making process so that they could lead certain aspects of the project, which increased their motivation and interest in this demanding work.

## **WE'RE ALREADY SEEING POSITIVE RESULTS WHILE WE ANTICIPATE LONG-LASTING IMPACT**

We built this middle school to offer our community a viable education option for their children ages 11 to 13. Before then, families would look outside the district, and so children would attend our schools up to age 11 and then sometimes enroll in our high schools. I expect enrollment in our high schools will increase because we can now offer continuity of education across all K-12 age groups. And increased enrollment means we'll be able to offer our students more opportunities because we'll have more resources.

The school only opened this semester, and it's a delight to see children who previously attended small elementary schools expand their social circle. We have many small schools—our smallest school has just 60 children—and the children who have arrived at our middle school have told me they've made lots of new friends.

## WE'VE NOW ENTERED A PERIOD OF FEEDBACK AND REFINEMENT

We had a significant increase in student enrollment over the summer, which we were not expecting. So, I'm making sure our administrators and teachers work together on the school schedule and altering class sizes so that there are minimal disruptions to the day-to-day running of the school.

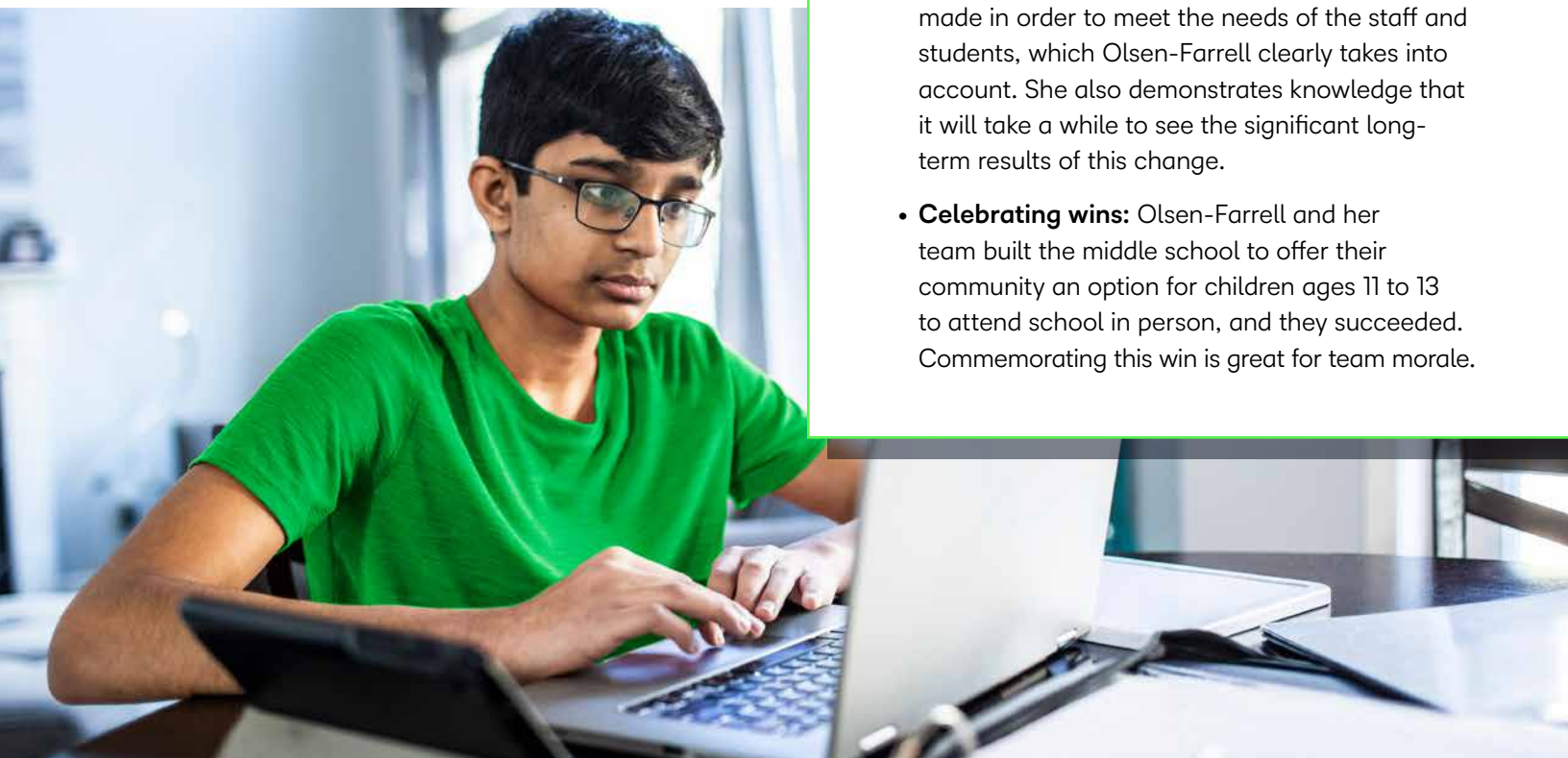
I'm always putting questions to my deputies to encourage a problem-solving mindset. What expectations does everyone need to be aware of? How do we teach and reteach those expectations? How do we, as the central office, pitch in and help? We don't want anyone to ever feel alone in this work.

## THINGS TURNED OUT BETTER THAN EXPECTED

Even though our bond was turned down, we were able to create a middle school with \$4 million rather than a \$60 million bond that the community didn't go for anyway. We would have had a lot more resistance and pushback throughout the entire process if the project had cost so much. It's a reminder that you can have the best-laid plans but adapting to circumstances will always serve your best interests.

## HOW BROOKE OLSEN-FARRELL APPLIED THE PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE CHANGE MANAGEMENT

- **Flexibility:** When the \$60 million bond was voted against, Olsen-Farrell readdressed the methods by which her team could create a new middle school, diverting funds where possible and working with a lower budget.
- **Communication:** Olsen-Farrell made sure to talk about the new middle school in public board meetings months before creating a plan to help people adjust to the idea. And when the middle school project started, she made sure stakeholders remained informed.
- **Genuine empathy:** By putting herself in the shoes of her staff, Olsen-Farrell was able to anticipate their concerns.
- **Elevating team members:** Even with a recent shift in leadership structure, Olsen-Farrell involved her deputies in the decision-making process so they could feel more efficacious in their new positions.
- **Perspective:** Even though the middle school is now running, alterations need to be continually made in order to meet the needs of the staff and students, which Olsen-Farrell clearly takes into account. She also demonstrates knowledge that it will take a while to see the significant long-term results of this change.
- **Celebrating wins:** Olsen-Farrell and her team built the middle school to offer their community an option for children ages 11 to 13 to attend school in person, and they succeeded. Commemorating this win is great for team morale.





## CHAPTER FOUR

# How To Implement a Change Management Plan

Some guidance to ensure your employees are supported throughout the entire process.



The first thing you need to do is assess the type of change you want to implement, which will inform how you want to execute it.

### **CATEGORIZING TYPES OF CHANGE**

You can classify change into broad groups according to scale, origin and style of implementation. We've already discussed how an innovation can range from a small change in one area of the organization to a wholesale shift in process. Let's look at how the origin of change plays a role in the planning process.





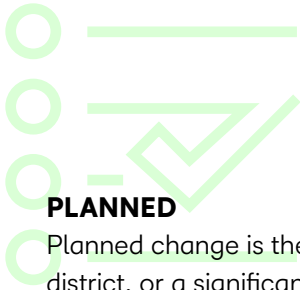
## ORIGIN

A plan for change can come from the leadership team who have considered which improvements their district needs to make in order to better serve its community. Change can also be reactive, where external circumstances—such as new government legislation concerning education and schools—prompt consideration and action.

In many cases, the type of change can be both planned and responsive. If obesity rates rise in a school district, the leadership team may create a responsive change plan to combat this by making physical education classes mandatory for all students. That might be accompanied by a carefully planned change to the school lunch menus, making only healthy food available.

Both changes meet the same needs: to help students become healthier and help them learn. But in this case, the responsive change is an acute measure that might be retired once the obesity rate falls to an acceptable level, whereas the change in the school menu will be a permanent cultural shift. You can also imagine a case where the situation is reversed, with the increase in exercise being a more permanent change and the new lunch menu being a temporary, targeted change. It really depends on the view of the leadership team and the route they decide to take.

It's important to have a sense of whether the change you want to introduce is planned or responsive, because it will affect the scope of your project and will determine whether the change has an expiration date or is a deep shift that will last years.



### PLANNED

Planned change is the process of preparing the district, or a significant number of schools or staff, for new goals or a new direction. Examples include introducing new systems of technology, changing reporting lines and building a new elementary school. In this case, the change is anticipated and comes from the top down.



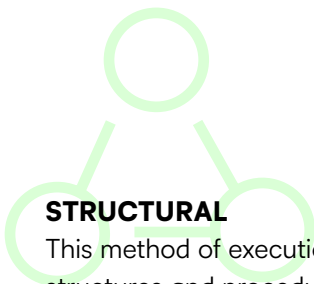
### RESPONSIVE

Responsive change entails making regular, targeted adjustments as and when necessary. Examples include adding after-school enrichment classes for a semester, reducing homework requirements during exam periods and making later start times available to teenage students. This change relies on collecting data and assessing the experiences of students and staff.

## IMPLEMENTATION

You can also assess the type of change by considering the way in which it will be executed. Will it tackle processes and procedures, or will it focus on the way people think and act?

Arguably, structural and cultural changes are intertwined because you can't separate what a human being does from how he or she thinks. If you successfully introduce a new technology tool in your school district—which is a structural change—the open-mindedness and positive attitude toward technology that ensues can be classified as a cultural shift. Likewise, implementing a cultural change where teachers are encouraged to share their lesson plans could lead to a structural change in the way they share information, because they now have an increased demand on the sharing of ideas.



### STRUCTURAL

This method of execution focuses on the systems, structures and procedures connected to the organization's intended goals. In school districts, structural changes emphasize specific systemic, structural and operational functions that need to be improved, such as changing the way exam scores are recorded and changing school opening hours.



### CULTURAL

This method refers to change that addresses the way people think. If you want to improve organizational ethos and bolster initiative-taking, you are considering a cultural change. In school districts, cultural changes can involve asking staff to adjust their perception of children so that they don't see any child as "bad" and encouraging teachers to focus on a restorative (rather than punitive) approach to handling disruptive behavior in the classroom.



# The 6 Main Steps of Change Management

We have assessed the leading scholarship on change management and highlighted the key steps to consider when creating and implementing a change management plan.

## 1. CREATE A VISION AND PLAN FOR CHANGE

People will adapt to change if you can show them you have a compelling vision of what the future will look like. “The biggest mistake that we often see people make when they’re adopting new technologies is not presenting a compelling vision,” says Kassia Gandhi, academic affairs director at D2L.

Consider your vision for a brighter future in your school district your point of origin. It’s the idea you’re going to keep coming back to when the implementation process feels challenging. That’s why it’s important to construct

your vision before you start preparing your organization for change. If you take the time to articulate your goals to yourself, you will be better prepared to answer staff questions in an inspiring way.

### As you start to create your plan, consider:

- What strategic objectives will this change help the organization achieve?
- What does success look like?
- Which metrics will you use?
- Who will be in charge of the implementation process?
- What specific policies and procedures will be followed?
- What is not included in the project’s scope?

While having a strategy is vital, the plan should also take into account any unknowns or potential obstacles that can appear during the implementation process and contingencies for overcoming obstacles.



## 2. PREPARE YOUR ORGANIZATION FOR CHANGE

To successfully pursue and implement change, your school district must be prepared both logistically and culturally. Before giving your staff a sense of the required logistics, do the cultural groundwork so that your staff feel positive about change.

During the planning stages, help your staff understand the need for change by encouraging them to recognize the pain points you wish the change to solve. If you can excite your teachers and administrators, they will become your change catalysts, helping persuade any naysayers they encounter, which will help reduce resistance during step 3.

While you may expect teachers and administrators to find your reasons for improvement compelling—for example, using a new LMS to improve school performance—they won't be able to fully conceptualize your plan until they know how it will affect them personally.

“That doesn't mean you don't need a strong vision for change,” says Gandhi. “You just need to make sure you're addressing staff's immediate concerns and how it impacts them, because otherwise they won't be able to absorb your vision.”

Once your stakeholders' individual questions get answered (e.g., How will this impact me?), they will move through the change adoption process and start considering the impact overall (e.g., How can we do it better together?).

## Know How Change Impacts People

### SELF CONCERNS

### TASK CONCERNS

1

#### Information Concerns

- What is the change?
- Why the change?
- When will the change happen?

2

#### Personal Concerns

- How will this impact me?
- Can I still use the tools I've been using?
- What's in it for me?
- How much time will it take?

3

#### Management Concerns

- When is training?
- When do we get access?
- How do I do it?
- Can you show me that one more time?

### IMPACT CONCERNS

4

#### Consequence Concerns

- How do I use this to achieve \_\_\_\_\_?
- How do I do it better?
- When can I have some help refining this?
- What can I do to improve my results?

5

#### Collaboration Concerns

- How do we do it better together?
- What can we do to improve our results?
- Who else is using/wants to use these approaches?
- Where can we meet to exchange ideas?

6

#### Refocusing Concerns

- What needs to be true for widespread innovation to happen?
- What systems and processes help faculty succeed?
- How do we systematically improve quality/engagement/persistence/retention/etc.?





### 3. IMPLEMENT THE CHANGES

Once the plan is in place and people are on board, it's time to make it happen. Focus on motivating your staff to take the essential actions necessary while also acknowledging any immediate successes.

When Stephanie Kelly, senior manager of instructional technology at Anne Arundel County Public Schools, led a project that moved 6,000+ teachers and 80,000+ students from Google Classroom to D2L Brightspace, she created a metaphor to help staff visualize the underlying reasons for the transition: “It’s time to move from our tent to the house with all the amenities.”

Kelly continually showed her staff the features, or “amenities,” of Brightspace during the adoption process, such as parent communication and data management tools, to demonstrate what would be possible moving forward—a tactic that helped keep her teachers optimistic and engaged.



#### 4. GIVE STAFF THE SUPPORT THEY NEED

You can group the way people approach change into five main segments on a bell curve, ranging from most willing to embrace change to most reluctant:

- **Innovators and Early Adopters:** “New things are good because they are new.”
- **Early Majority:** “New is good if my friend thinks it’s good.”
- **Late Majority:** “New is suspicious and to be doubted.”
- **Laggards:** “New is bad and not to be trusted.”

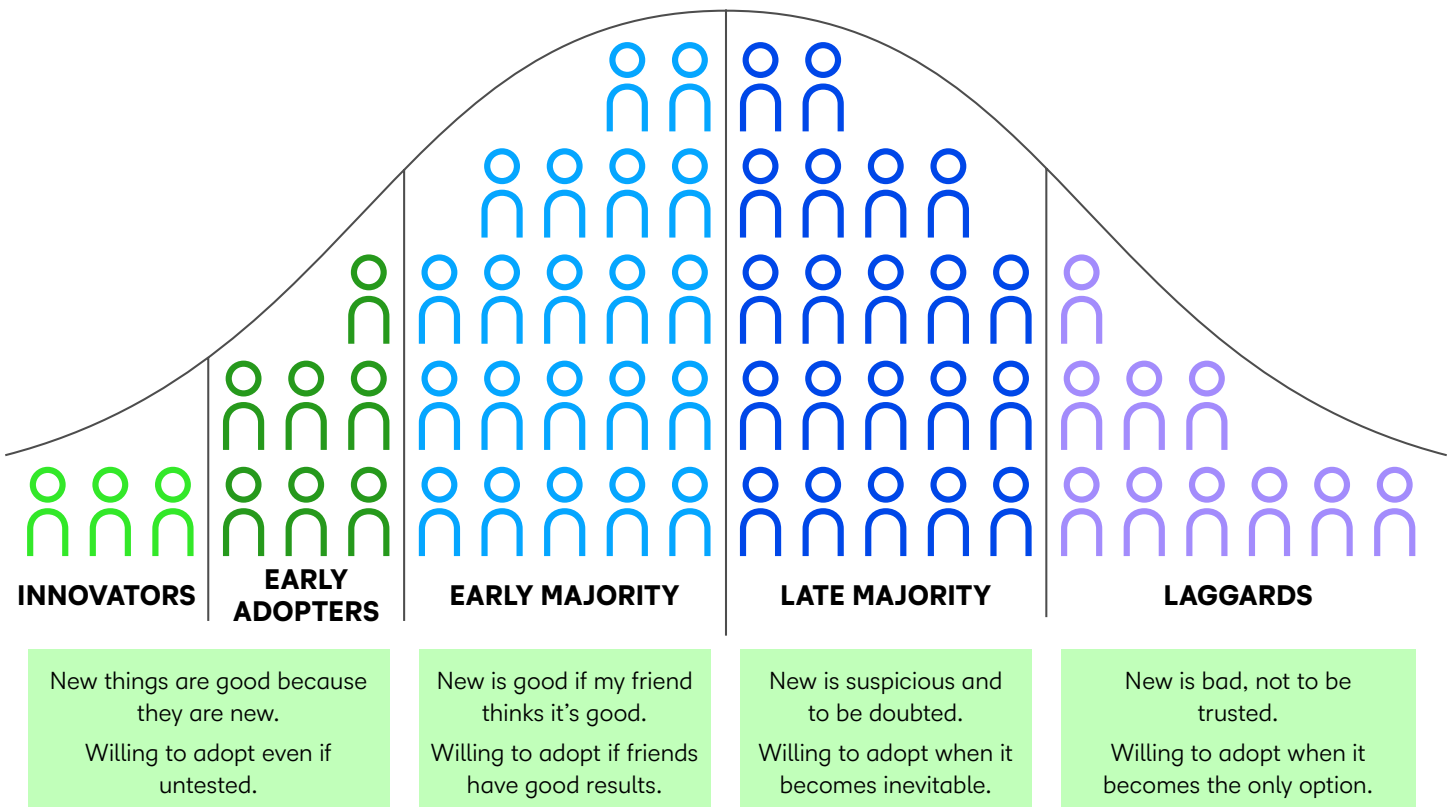
Based on this model, Kelly and her team in Maryland created enablement and communication plans tailored not only to people’s specific roles (such as teachers, parents

and IT leaders) but also to their adoption type (such as early adopters, early majority and late majority), because the needs of each group are different.

“That chart helped me through the entire implementation process,” says Kelly. After figuring out who her early adopters were, Kelly’s team started a “road tour” where the teachers who were getting the most out of Brightspace could demonstrate its features for their colleagues.

Teachers who were not yet enthusiastic about the LMS were invited to see what it was capable of, which inspired them. Kelly says, “When they saw other teachers [using the new technology], they started to say, ‘I can do this too.’”

## Understand the People of Change



## **5. EMBED CHANGES WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION'S CULTURE AND PRACTICES**

When a change initiative is over, staff can slip into the old way of doing things. It is crucial you don't let this happen. If you can embed the changes into the workings of your organization, this will help prevent backsliding. For example, if you stop sending hard copies of report cards home and transition to an online tool, tie that piece of administration into something teachers already do, such as emailing parents. If you stack a change on top of well-formed habits, it's more likely to stick.

## **6. REVIEW PROGRESS AND ANALYZE RESULTS**

A change initiative's completion does not necessarily mean that it was a success. By doing analyses and evaluations, leaders can learn whether a change endeavor was successful or unsuccessful or had mixed results. Additionally, it may provide insightful information and lessons that can be used in future change initiatives.

Every school district will require a unique approach to change, depending on how big the change will be, how quickly you want to move the change forward, and the kind of infrastructure and capacity you already have within your district to facilitate that change.

While research into change management can help guide you, remember that no one outside your organization understands your school district in the same detail as you do. Your knowledge of the kind of support your staff might need and what sort of vision they will respond to, among other things, are invaluable to the process.

Overall, Gandhi asks district leaders to be patient: "Allow time; do not rush your results." That doesn't mean you don't rush the change itself—just remember that making deep, fundamental change can take years, even though you can produce positive results from day one.

At D2L, we support our clients by tailoring a change management plan to their district's individual needs. As a starting point, we consider three main phases of change: preparing for change, leading the change, and measuring and sustaining the change. Our mindful approach to change management process considers both the individual and the organization, helping each person thrive so he or she can do their best work.





## CHAPTER FIVE

# The Importance of Communication

How Rick Surrency, Superintendent at Putnam County School District, Putnam County, Florida, sent graduation rates soaring with a focused change management plan.



**RICK SURRENCY**  
District School Superintendent  
Putnam County School District  
Putnam County, Florida

Rick Surrency has been working in the Putnam County School District for over 20 years, with this year being his eighth as superintendent. Whereas most superintendents in the U.S. are appointed by the school board, Surrency runs for election every four years, which is common in Florida. This means he has to be cognizant of the decisions he makes—especially ones that bring about change—and the impact they have on public perception.

When Surrency first ran for election in 2015, Putnam County had a graduation rate of 54.9%, significantly less than the **national average of 83.2%**, meaning only 1 in 2 students were leaving high school with a diploma. This created angst within the community, as it diminished not only the career prospects of high school leavers who didn't have a diploma but also everyone in the county because businesses reported the low graduation rate as a reason not to set up shop in the county.

When Surrency was elected, he and his team worked tirelessly to improve graduation rates, and the district now boasts a rate of 92.5%. This is the greatest increase the district has experienced and is also the largest gain in the entire state of Florida from 2015 to 2021. As you can imagine, this improvement required new thinking and systemic change. Always considering the future, Surrency says, "We've made a positive impact, but now we have to sustain that." He tells us in his own words how his team turned the ship around and why he thinks it's important for leaders to keep looking at the horizon.



## **DO YOUR RESEARCH TO PINPOINT WHICH CHANGES NEED TO BE MADE**

Here's the No. 1 thing we did right out of the gate: We stopped allowing students to walk across the stage at graduation if they did not earn a diploma. The reason we did that is because attendance rates at graduation were always high, implying students and their families valued this rite of passage. So, we saw an opportunity to incentivize study. If only the students who earned a diploma could walk across the stage at graduation, maybe students would work hard to obtain one. And it worked. We got a lot of complaints, but it worked.

And then we started another lot of other systemic changes to target graduation rates, but we set the expectation early and targeted change to meet the outcome rather than create an unnecessary superfluous change that didn't serve our goals. And that doesn't mean we weren't blindsided by circumstances from time to time. Last year, for example, we had to close down five of 18 schools in our district due to declining enrollment. This was not an ideal situation, but the data was telling us we needed to close schools to remain viable. And so, we made sure to carefully and clearly communicate that to the public.

## **FRONT-LOAD INFORMATION**

In some cases, I think we've done a really good job of pushing out communication ahead of time, and in some cases, I've held panel discussions and listened to people demonstrate a lack of understanding about the upcoming change. In those cases, I think to myself, "How did we miss that group?" because we clearly didn't communicate our plan to them very well.

In general, our educators are the ones people seek out if they want to know more details about an upcoming change, so we empower them with as much information as possible. We are currently trying to pass a \$300 million bond issue, and we started our campaign by speaking to our teachers. We visited every single school to talk to them about the bond issue and what it could do for their students. We know that people will come up to our teachers and say, "What's happening?" so we want them to be informed.

## **REPETITION, REPETITION, REPETITION**

Give a great speech to your stakeholders by following the same structure of delivery used by the masters of rhetoric, the ancient Greeks:

### **1. TELL THEM WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO TELL THEM.**

Tonight, we're going to discuss our high school graduation ceremony and why we're only allowing students who graduate to walk across the stage on graduation day.

### **2. TELL THEM.**

From now on, only students who have graduated (and therefore gained passing grades) will be permitted to walk across the stage on graduation day. Those students who do not achieve passing grades will be permitted to attend graduation day, but not to walk across the stage or have their name called.

### **3. TELL THEM WHAT YOU JUST TOLD THEM.**

As I've just explained, the students who gain a passing grade can walk across the stage on graduation day.

Following these steps will help transmit the information you wish to convey to your audience. Many TV news broadcasters use the same three-step sequence today.



**“When I was a principal, I knew the teachers in my school who were the movers and the shakers. As a leader, it’s even more important to know who those people are so that you can monitor the pulse of what’s going on across the entire organization.”**

Rick Surrency, Superintendent at Putnam County School District, Putnam County, Florida

### **KNOW WHO YOUR MOVERS AND SHAKERS ARE AND CULTIVATE THEIR SUPPORT**

Sometimes, instead of sharing your change management plan with everyone, you should talk to the right people who will become your champions for change and get everyone else on board.

When appropriate, I’ll reach out to my champions for change to get their support because they also act like your diplomats throughout the whole process, which is invaluable.

### **EMBRACE FEEDBACK IN AN AUTHENTIC WAY**

One of the most important parts of my job is establishing good community communication. You want a foundational level of trust and openness for the times you do have to make tough decisions, such as when we closed our schools during COVID-19.

If you are eliciting feedback, you have to be honest with yourself and make sure you’re not trying to manipulate people into agreeing with decisions you have already

made. And in the cases where it’s a decision you have already made, you need to be brave enough to admit the plan is already in motion.

People want to be heard. They may not agree with your decision, but they will trust you as an organization if you are honest with them. And they’ll move forward with things they don’t agree with because they respect the fact you’re doing it for the right reasons, and every change we make to our district is to better serve our children.

### **YOUR JOB AS A LEADER IS TO ANTICIPATE CHANGE AND TIME ITS IMPLEMENTATION APPROPRIATELY**

I’ve given a presentation on the five lessons of leadership, and it talks about the change process. The main message is that we as leaders don’t want to just react to a crisis; we want to see the crisis on the horizon and stop it from becoming one by the time it gets to us. I think that, as leaders, we need to learn to “read the tea leaves” and apply our knowledge to the circumstances so that we can be proactive in our approach to adaptation and growth.

## HOW RICK SURRENCY APPLIED THE PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE CHANGE MANAGEMENT:

- **Perspective:** Surrency argues that as a leader, your role is to continually anticipate what needs to be done to help the organization thrive, which naturally involves change management.
- **Focused change:** To improve graduation rates, Surrency and his team zeroed in on one key innovation, which ended up yielding disproportionately strong results.
- **Sharing an inspiring vision:** Surrency ran his election campaign on the promise to improve the school experience for staff and students. By setting the expectation for excellence early on, he was able to introduce systemic changes his community was primed for.
- **Communication:** Plans for change get communicated with stakeholders, especially the district's educators, who are the people others seek out if they want to know more details about an impending change in the school district.
- **Welcoming feedback:** Surrency and his team were purposeful and clear in their communication about upcoming changes and genuinely relished feedback from key stakeholders in order to make them feel heard and to build trust.
- **Knowing who your champions are:** Sometimes Surrency would communicate change management plans with the staff he knew would embrace change so that they could help persuade others to approach change with eagerness rather than fear.







## CHAPTER SIX

# The Art of Embracing Change

How Dr. Susan Tave Zelman, former superintendent and co-author of *The Buying and Selling of American Education*, identified change as the essence of progress.



**DR. SUSAN TAVE ZELMAN**  
Co-author of *The Buying and Selling of American Education*  
and former superintendent of  
public instruction in Ohio  
Columbus, Ohio

Dr. Susan Tave Zelman has experience in education policy and children’s programming and worked as superintendent of public instruction for the Ohio Department of Education for 10 years before becoming their executive director for six years. Zelman’s latest achievement in the field of education came in the shape of coauthoring the book titled *The Buying and Selling of American Education: Reimagining a System of Schools*

for All Children (published November 2022). Zelman interviewed over 140 superintendents for the book, in which she and her coauthor, Dr. Margaret Sorensen, consider the challenges facing K-12 education today.

When Zelman first joined the Ohio Department of Education, she had strong ideas about the goals she wanted her team to achieve. Receiving a somewhat frosty reception when she arrived, Zelman’s first experience of change management was getting her staff accustomed to having her in charge. A self-described “change agent,” Zelman ascribes her open-mindedness to her belief in social justice, embracing that we should consider all options in order to make education more equitable. She tells us in her own words about some of the initiatives she led in Ohio and her ideas about how changing the systems in education could mean a brighter future.



## **I'D DESCRIBE MYSELF AS NATURALLY OPEN TO CHANGE**

I was appointed superintendent of public instruction in Ohio in 1998, and to be candid, I believe I inherited a dysfunctional education department that needed wholesale change. I'm outgoing and confident, and a lot of people seemed very uncomfortable with me being in charge. Looking back on it, I was probably perceived as an outsider: I am female, a New Yorker and Jewish. I hadn't walked in any of my predecessors' shoes, so to speak.

I entered the role with three major goals: Raise expectations, build the capacity of our system to meet those expectations (both internally and externally) and hold ourselves accountable for results. What I didn't see coming was that I might have to shift our work culture into a more positive one. I needed a culture where people would feel open to exchanging ideas and constructive criticism; I needed a caring community where everyone had high expectations of one another but also got to know one another and supported each other.

So, the first thing I did was restructure our onboarding process. I would talk to the new people in the department about why I loved the job and why I cared about the Department of Education, and how this was going to be a caring community and so forth. I went over my one-page strategic plan with them, and I would welcome feedback and discussion about our goals. We'd all then meet twice a year to discuss strategy. I wanted everybody, including the people in the mailroom, to understand what our organization was about.

## **THINKING STRATEGICALLY**

I hired a communications firm to help me plan and broadcast my plans to staff and families in a way that would inspire their support. I met with the firm to discuss my plans for the district over the course of about six months, and we put together various meetings and mailings for my "customers." (Customers being my school districts—that's how I'd view my staff across different districts, which helped me focus on delivering results and keeping them happy.)

The interactions I had with staff early on, and changing plans based on their feedback, really helped build trust.



**“I believe you can never overcommunicate. It’s better to put as much information out there as possible—and my staff seemed to respond to that. But at the same time, it’s important to listen and make modifications based on what you hear from staff.”**

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*Dr. Susan Tave Zelman, co-author of *The Buying and Selling of American Education* and former superintendent of public instruction in Ohio*

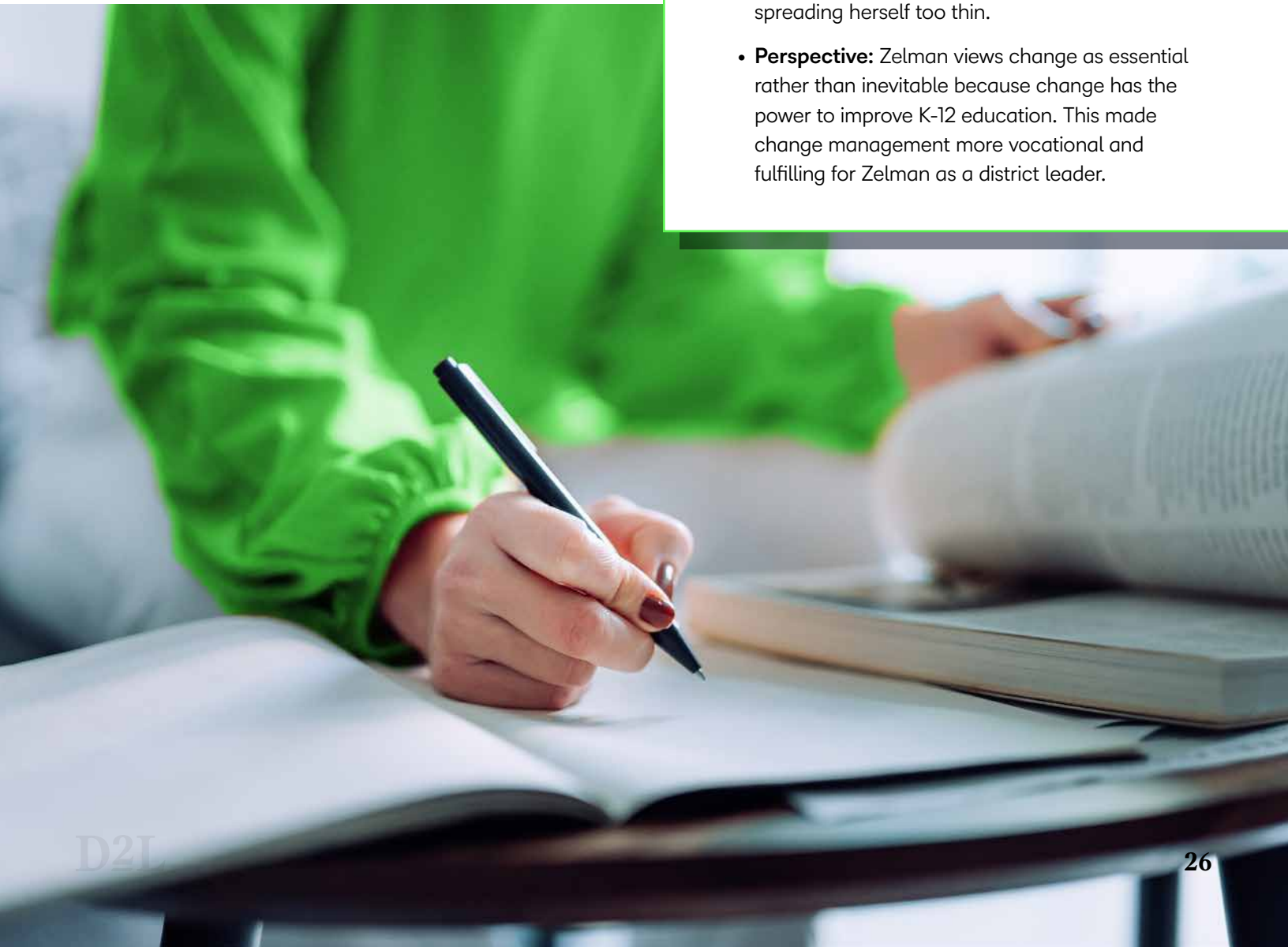
## ACCEPTING THE NECESSITY OF INNOVATION

In my book *The Buying and Selling of American Education*, I argue that our nation's education system is ailing and that we need to reimagine what schools can look like. You can attempt to beautify a house that has a bad structure by painting it, but wouldn't it be wiser to address the structure of the building? We sometimes fall prey to doing the same with education—we improve cosmetic aspects while cracks in the system continue to deepen.

There is room for growth in many areas of K–12 public schools, such as making funding more equitable and improving the way we communicate with parents. School can be all things to all people, and we need to teach superintendents how to adapt to various constituencies so that they can lead with a strategic plan and still be able to inspire a room full of staff who all have different interests and perspectives.

## HOW SUSAN TAVE ZELMAN APPLIED THE PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE CHANGE MANAGEMENT:

- **Sharing an inspiring vision:** Zelman had strong ideas about the kind of organization she wanted to lead and communicated her goals to staff, giving them something to rally behind.
- **Communication:** To share and publicize her mission, Zelman hired a communications firm to help shape her messaging in order to energize her staff and local families. Zelman believes there's no such thing as too much communication—it's better to share information whenever possible to manage people's expectations.
- **Focused change:** Zelman's aim was to change the culture of the organization, so she addressed one aspect at a time, such as changing the staff onboarding process rather than taking on every aspect of the organization's culture at once and spreading herself too thin.
- **Perspective:** Zelman views change as essential rather than inevitable because change has the power to improve K-12 education. This made change management more vocational and fulfilling for Zelman as a district leader.



# Is Change Always Good?

Strong leadership skills continue to be invaluable

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We've discussed the inevitability of change and the essential need for school districts to adapt to circumstances in order to better serve their communities. We've also looked at how change management plans work, the obstacles you might face and how to overcome those challenges. With our deep focus on managing change, we want to take a step back and ask you this: Is change always good?

The ultimate work of schools is to prepare their students to thrive in an ever-changing world. It's therefore appropriate that the adults who help shape their growth also have a positive attitude toward change and exhibit the ability to evolve.

Change can offer opportunities to develop and grow. It can teach us about our ideas and our shortcomings. Change can therefore be a force for good, shaking off the inertia of stagnating systems and processes, improving the outcomes of both staff and students.

Focusing on change management doesn't mean we need to reject the past entirely—sometimes a strategy that worked previously could help with a current project. It also doesn't mean we need to divorce ourselves from systems and processes that work well today—if a procedure is working efficiently and helps the district meet its goals as well as it can, does it make sense to change it?

Managing change effectively is important; however, your school district relies on your individual discernment regarding what changes should be made. If you decide to implement a change that is unnecessary and will not help your district reach its goals, it doesn't matter how well you manage the process. On the other hand, if you combine efficient change management with a strategically selected area of improvement, you will be unstoppable.

As Rick Surrency, district school superintendent in Putnam County, Florida, put it, "We set the expectation early and targeted change to meet the outcome rather than create an unnecessary superfluous change that didn't serve our goals." This allowed his team to distribute resources and time effectively and to gain the trust of their constituents.



No matter how much progress we make in terms of systems or technology development, your judgment will always be the guiding star for change. The decisions you make today will affect the outcomes of staff and students for years to come, which are shaped by your discipline, focus, determination and perseverance.



## ABOUT D2L

D2L is a global learning innovation company, reshaping the future of education and work. We're leading the way into a new era of personalized learning, driven by the belief that everyone deserves access to high-quality education, regardless of their age, ability or location. Our signature technology products—D2L Brightspace and D2L Wave—enhance the learning experience for millions of learners at every stage of life, from the earliest days of school to the working world.

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