POLICY BRIEF

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More Than Maintenance
Sustaining Improvement Efforts Over the Long Run
By Craig Jerald

Maintain: *To keep in an existing state; CARRY ON, KEEP UP*

Sustain: *To give support or supply with sustenance; NOURISH, PROLONG*

School personnel often mistakenly believe that sustaining improvement over a long period of time simply requires them to keep up new practices past the implementation year. But that initial maintenance is only the first step of a much longer journey. School leaders and staff members must also learn how to intentionally *nourish and prolong improvement initiatives* by extending and adapting them over time. In other words, sustaining an improvement effort requires more than simple maintenance. Prolonged, continuous improvement requires continually asking and acting on the answers to several key questions: *How can*

we do even better tomorrow? What's working and what's not? What do we need to change next?

The first part of this policy brief breaks down the process of sustaining improvement and examines each of its key elements. The second part offers several important strategies for protecting and abetting that process over the long term.

The stakes are huge. Too many school improvement efforts wither and die after a year or two of hard work, often just following the first flush of success. At the same time, research shows that sustaining reforms beyond a few years can create big payoffs for students. One large-scale study of student achievement in schools implementing comprehensive school reform (CSR) models found that "after the fifth year of implementation, CSR effects began to increase substantially."[1]

Key Elements: Three Core Activities to Sustain Improvement

Sustaining improvement is a *long-term process* that involves the following three kinds of overlapping activities:

- *Maintaining* the improvement effort beyond initial implementation.

- *Extending* the improvement effort after its initial success.

- *Adapting* the improvement effort so that it survives—and thrives—over the long term.

Step 1. Maintaining Improvement Initiatives Beyond the Implementation Year

The obvious first step in sustaining any school improvement effort must be to maintain new practices beyond a few months or the first year of implementation. However, school leaders and staff members are often surprised to discover that maintaining reforms can require more than simple persistence. Even in schools where implementation goes smoothly and successfully during the first year, many kinds of unforeseen obstacles can arise the following year or the year after.

Unfortunately, there is no formula for predicting the factors that will threaten an improvement effort two or three years into implementation. Schools are complex organizations, and changing major practices in one part of the organization can have unforeseeable effects on other parts of the organization. Therefore, maintaining an improvement effort requires keeping a sharp eye on how the change process is affecting staff members and students; keeping a constant lookout for warning signs of obstacles that might threaten the effort; and keeping a very open mind to how challenges can arise from even the most unlikely places.

Consider the case of Baltimore's Patterson High School.[2] In the spring of 1994, Patterson was named "reconstitution eligible" by the state of Maryland. Over the next year, a new principal and her staff worked with experts at Johns Hopkins University's Center for Research on the

Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR) to create a plan for dramatic restructuring. The plan called for breaking up the high school into smaller academies (including a ninth-grade Success Academy) and reworking the master schedule to allow for extended class periods, interdisciplinary team teaching, and collaborative planning and professional development.

By the end of the first year of implementation (1995–96), the plan had generated substantial improvements. Student behavior improved, attendance shot up, ninth-grade retention decreased dramatically, and test scores began to rise.[3] The turnaround was so dramatic that other high schools began to approach CRESPAR for assistance in implementing similar reforms.[4]

By the end of the following year (1996–97), however, tensions between groups of teachers, and between teachers and school administrators, began to mount, putting the improvement effort in jeopardy. By the end of the third year, attendance rates and test scores began to slip.

What went wrong? Many factors contributed to the fragmentation and frustration of the staff. However, one of the greatest challenges stemmed from the tremendous *success of the reform effort itself:* Far more ninth graders were promoted to the 10th grade than ever before. As a consequence, 10th-grade teachers returned to school the following year to face much bigger—and much more heterogeneous—classes than they were used to teaching. Upper grade teachers accused ninth-grade teachers of watering down standards. Ninth-grade teachers fired back with accusations of elitism and even racism.[5] No one had envisioned how fundamentally the rest of the school would need to change if the ninth-grade Success Academy succeeded.

Step 2. Extending the Improvement Effort to Capitalize on Early Success

After watching dozens of organizational change efforts, retired Harvard Business School Professor John P. Kotter wrote that one of the most common and most damaging mistakes leaders make following implementation is to declare victory too early. "Instead of declaring victory," he wrote, "leaders of successful efforts use the

credibility afforded by short-term wins to tackle even bigger problems. They go after systems and structures that are not consistent with the transformation vision and have not been confronted before."[6]

In other words, sustaining success over the long term requires fierce, very intentional kind of "opportunism." That isn't just a platitude: The research on organizational change has confirmed again and again that the organizations most successful at sustaining improvement over long periods of time learn to enact new, "next generation" improvements even as they work to maintain practices that are already working.

For example, in a groundbreaking study of corporations that had sustained success over decades—and in some cases over a century— researchers Jim Collins and Jerry Porras found that a key feature of such companies was a deeply ingrained attitude that "good enough never is":

The critical question asked by a visionary company is not "How well are we doing?" […] For these companies, the critical question is *"How can we do better tomorrow than we did today?"* They institutionalize this question as way of life—a habit of mind and action. […] There is no ultimate finish line in a highly visionary company. There is no "having made it." There is no point where they feel they can coast the rest of the way, living off the fruits of their labor.[7]

A study of elementary school improvement in Washington echoed that finding: "Schools that sustained improvement made deeper and more consistent changes." In contrast to schools that plateaued or declined, "Sustaining schools did not let down their guard after making gains. They continued to push beyond a comfortable level and did not become complacent." Instead, they intensified their use of strategies the researchers had identified as fueling initial success and even extended changes in curriculum and instruction into earlier grades. One principal told the researchers: "[T]here's a lot of pressure on this school to improve. But there's also a lot of 'we've shown we can do it, let's do it better.' We're beyond making excuses about our kids."[8]

The key point, however, is not simply to "always try to do better" as a virtue in its own right. Rather, it is that organizations must continue to move forward; those that do not keep trying to do better eventually jeopardize their existing improvement initiatives and can eventually lose ground. As Kotter notes, "critical momentum can be lost and regression may follow."[9]

A recent article in the *Journal for Education of Students Placed at Risk* clearly illustrates the dangers of complacency.[10] Teachers Debra Mentzer and Tricia Shaughnessy provide a fascinating case study of a schoolwide improvement effort spanning 15 years at Hawthorne Academy, an inner-city school in downtown San Antonio. In the early 1990s, Hawthorne's staff worked with the district, a local university, and a national foundation to implement a challenging new curriculum and related reforms. The results were impressive, and a spate of national news stories about Hawthorne soon followed. "It would not be exaggerating to say that, as teachers, we relished our successes and saw a boundless future for our school, our students, and ourselves," the two teachers recount.[11]

By the late 1990s, however, the reforms were in jeopardy. What went wrong? Again, the factors were complex. But Mentzer and Shaughnessy point to one major cause: The staff entered what the authors call an "Era of Coasting":

> The new leadership inherited a school that was respected and viewed as "successful." Visitors came from around the nation and from overseas. The principal chose not to make any changes to the existing program. While this sounded wonderful on the surface, the reality was that no changes at all were made. Continual progress was abandoned in favor of the status quo. […] The school was coasting on its reputation and its past. Unfortunately, we were no longer leading, since we had not continued improving. […] Enthusiasm lagged, test scores plateaued, and the sparks of our vision became dull.[12]

While it's important to celebrate early success, schools that successfully sustain reforms do not allow the first flush of success to turn into complacency.

Step 3. Adapting Improvement Initiatives Over Time

Over the long term, maintaining and extending improvement initiatives is not enough. Expectations change, policies change, local and state political environments change, students change, school leaders change, and faculties change. As a result, even the most successful improvement initiatives must eventually "evolve or die."

Indeed, researchers who study successful organizational change efforts that are sustained over long periods of time frequently invoke *evolution* as a metaphor to describe what they find. For example, Collins and Porras write that companies sustaining success over many decades "mimic the biological evolution of species. We found the concepts in Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* to be more helpful for replicating the success of certain visionary companies than any textbook on corporate strategic planning."[13]

They emphasize, however, this finding does not simply mean that "change is the only constant." Such companies all exhibit one very important constant—a clear organizational vision comprised of a well-defined mission and set of core values that seldom, if ever, change. Organizations that sustain growth over long periods of time cling fiercely to their core visions while considering everything else—practices, structures, job definitions, schedules—up for grabs.[14]

Education researchers Jeanne Rose Century and Abigail Justice Levy found something very similar in a study of science education reforms sustained over at least a decade across seven school districts: "Programs that had become 'sustainable' […] had moved beyond maintenance and had developed the ability to evolve." Indeed, after enough years, the programs often looked much different than they had when they were implemented. The researchers eventually came to define sustainability as "the ability of a program to maintain its core beliefs and values and use them to guide program adaptations to changes and pressures over time."[15]

This evolutionary process actually takes two forms. First is a kind of "selective adaptation," in which organizations constantly try new things, keeping those that work while throwing away those that don't; the second is the "fine-tuning" of individual reform elements to ensure that they keep working as the environment around them changes.

Selective Adaptation. Collins and Porras write, "In studying the history of visionary companies, we were struck by how often they made some of their best moves not by detailed strategic planning, but rather by experimentation, trial and error, opportunism, and—quite literally—accident." In other words, companies that are built to last "try a lot of stuff and keep what works."[16]

Of course, there are two important caveats to that finding. First, their observation doesn't mean that successful organizations simply flail around blindly, trying anything that sounds remotely interesting. Instead, the things they try are "smart" in two important ways: They are strongly influenced by and aligned with a clear vision—the organization's mission and core values. And they are guided by evidence about what has worked elsewhere and what research has proven to be effective.

The same is true for high-performing schools. During a panel at the NewSchools Venture Fund's 2004 summit, Allison Rouse, an official with the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), a network of highly successful schools that seek out and serve low-income students, noted, "We pilot a lot of stuff. We simply try everything. And we fail a lot. But we fail trying something great."[17]

Second, the unspoken corollary to "keeping what works" is throwing away what doesn't. Many schools are littered with layer upon layer of past reforms that no longer produce results, if they ever did at all. On the other hand, highly successful schools are unsentimental about jettisoning programs that don't work—even if students, parents, or teachers like them a lot. As one principal told the author of a recent study comparing California schools that had sustained improvement with schools that had not: "You

can't feel sorry that something doesn't work; you just have to try something different."[18]

Fine-Tuning. Sometimes educators decide that a particular program or practice is worth keeping, but only if it can be adapted so that it aligns with current needs and can continue to deliver results in a changing environment.

For example, the Hawthorne Academy staff fought intensely to keep the curriculum they felt had delivered great benefits for students, but eventually realized they would have to work together to align it with evolving state standards and assessments. The entire staff met for a full week during the summer of 2001–02 to pull apart the curriculum and reconstruct it so that it better aligned with state standards. "This was a laborious task, but one that has provided us with a seamless integration of the Core Knowledge Sequence and the state standards that will, in tandem, lead to student success" Mentzer and Shaughnessy write.[19]

Key Enablers: Five Strategies That Can Help Schools Sustain Improvement

School personnel who know that sustaining reform is a *process*—and who understand the key elements of that process—will fare better than those who do not. But the following general strategies also can help:

1. Collect lots of information on the impact of new initiatives, including but not limited to annual student assessment results. Such information will be crucial to deciding what's working and what's not, and also can provide crucial evidence that sophisticated reforms are working when faced with pressure to replace them with quick and easy shortcuts. For example, the Hawthorne teachers note, "We did not gather data to validate our successes or provide insight for adjustments. […] Because we had not gathered defined data on their efficacy, these programs were at risk" when a new principal was appointed from outside.[20] Keeping monthly tabs on patterns in student behavior, student and teacher attendance, and classroom assessments

and grades can provide early indications of forward momentum or problems. The quarterly benchmark assessments that many school districts are putting into place also can offer invaluable evidence about the impact of reforms.

2. Ensure that partnerships with outside assistance providers extend beyond the initial stages of an improvement effort. One of the major lessons Johns Hopkins researchers learned in working with Baltimore's Patterson High School is that "a leadership team in a reforming high school must be supported through its struggle by the district and other outside reform partners. […] We argue that while intensive support is critical for the planning and initial implementation phases, assistance from external providers may need to be continued for an indefinite period to help negotiate inevitable changes in district leadership, and other potentially disruptive forces."[21] External providers can play a crucial role in helping schools accurately pinpoint what's working and what's not, as well as providing advice on how reforms can be adapted to work better.

3. The staff at Hawthorne Academy learned the value of external providers can sometimes extend from the technical to the political. When a new principal put pressure on them to replace successful reforms, the school's partnership with a local university proved critical. "When there was this crucial time, [university faculty members] talked to our superintendent and said if things don't get better, there's really going to be a problem," recalls Guadalupe Rodriguez-Pollock, Hawthorne's current principal and a special education teacher at the school when it began implementing the reforms. "So our superintendent made some leadership changes and began to promote from within."[22]

Create a strategy for communicating the school's vision and core values to new staff members so they understand not just *how* things are done, but *why* things are done the way they are. "One of our early failures was the lack of a mentoring plan for new staff

members," write Mentzer and Shaughnessy. "Mentorship was done informally at some grade levels. […] We did not have a formal schoolwide plan to share the vision, mission, expectations, or traditions of Hawthorne. Things were told to new staff members, but the philosophy behind why these things were present in our school culture was not necessarily shared."[23] Rather than assuming that such important knowledge will automatically "be passed down through the generations," schools can set up formal mentoring programs to ensure that it does.

4. Create a strategy to develop leadership from within. One of the more surprising findings of research on organizations that sustain growth over long periods is that they tend to rely on homegrown leaders promoted from within. "Homegrown management rules at the visionary companies to a far greater degree than at the comparison companies (by a factor of six)," write Collins and Porras.[24] "Simply put, our research leads us to conclude that it is extraordinarily difficult to become and remain a highly visionary company by hiring top management from outside the organization. Equally important, there is absolutely no inconsistency between promoting from within and stimulating significant change."[25]

Center for Leadership in School Reform CEO Philip Schlechty argues that the issue of leadership succession is just as important for sustaining improvement in education. "Executive succession planning, which is virtually absent in most school districts, is […] essential to the maintenance of direction," he writes. "Indeed, it is the absence of such planning that leads teachers to the view that 'this too shall pass,' a view that not only decreases commitment but engenders cynicism as well. […] People who are asked to make the sacrifices that really hard change requires need to be assured that there is a leadership structure in place that will sustain them."[26]

Anecdotal evidence suggests that high-improving districts and schools are discovering the value of internal leadership

development. For example, an administrator in Montgomery County, Maryland, recently told an *Education Week* reporter doing a story on the county's progress in raising achievement and closing gaps, "It's important in Montgomery County that when you go into a leadership position, you're like the Cadillac—that all we need to do is polish you." Last year, only four of the district's 83 new school administrators were hired from outside the system.[27]

And Rodriguez-Pollock of the Hawthorne Academy says this is one of the biggest lessons she and her staff have learned during the school's 15-year improvement effort: "We're thinking the only way this campus can continue to be successful is to grow our own administrators. Some of us are getting near retirement and so we're training the younger ones to follow through."[28]

5. Ensure that responsibility for leading reform efforts is distributed among staff members and not just concentrated in the administration. A recent study comparing California schools that sustained improvement with those that did not found that all the successful schools had strong teacher leadership.[29] Strong teacher leadership can ensure that reforms last even when principals do not.

Conclusion

Clearly, sustaining reform is as complicated a process as organizing for, planning for, and implementing an improvement effort, requiring just as much intellectual honesty, creativity, and unflinching courage. But there is plentiful evidence that sustaining improvement is possible, even over very long periods, and that the benefits for students are great indeed. Consider, one last time, the example of Hawthorne Academy.

"In 1987, Hawthorne Elementary School battled all of the problems common to inner-city schools: low achievement, inconsistent attendance, and a transient population with student behaviors ranging from apathetic to disruptive. We could see that if we did not do

something to break the cycle of failure, our students would end up on the streets or dead," write Mentzer and Shaughnessy.[30] But by 2004, the school's overall passing rate on the state assessment exceeded its district's average by nearly 30 points and the state average by a comfortable margin. Even more impressive, the results revealed that Hawthorne's Hispanic seventh graders (who also are mostly low-income) had closed the achievement gap, outscoring white seventh graders statewide in every subject and by about 10 percentage points overall.[31]

Asked about the most important thing a school can do to sustain reform, not just over a few years but over decades, Hawthorne's principal sums up, "We follow our philosophy and vision and we work together as a team."[32] When all is said and done, it turns out that sustaining improvement is just that simple—and just that challenging.

Endnotes

[1] Borman, G. D., Hewes, G. M., Overman, L. T., & Brown, S. (2002, November). *Comprehensive school reform and student achievement: A meta-analysis.* Baltimore: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk. (page 27) Retrieved September 30, 2005, from www.csos.jhu.edu/CRESPAR/techReports/Report59.pdf

[2] This example comes from Legters, N. E., Balfanz, R., Jordan, W. J., & McPartland, J. M. (2002). *Comprehensive reform for urban high schools: A Talent Development approach.* New York: Teachers College Press. (pages 43–100)

[3] The proportion of Patterson ninth graders who were "repeaters" dropped from about 50 percent before implementation to about 15 percent in subsequent years. Legters, N. E., Balfanz, R., Jordan, W. J., & McPartland, J. M. (2002). *Comprehensive reform for urban high schools: A Talent Development approach.* New York: Teachers College Press. (page 70)

[4] Indeed, the plan eventually evolved into a widely recognized whole-school reform model, Talent Development, currently being implemented in more than 33 high schools across 12 states. For what the model looks like now, visit the Web site http://www.csos.jhu.edu/tdhs/

[5] Legters, N. E., Balfanz, R., Jordan, W. J., & McPartland, J. M. (2002). *Comprehensive reform for urban high schools: A Talent Development approach.* New York: Teachers College Press. (pages 88–89)

[6] Kotter, J. P. (1998). Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. In *Harvard business review on change.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press. (page 17)

[7] Collins, J. C., & Porras, J. I. (1994). *Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies.* New York: HarperCollins. (pages 185–186)

[8] Lake, R., McCarthy, M., Taggart, S., & Celio, M. B. (2000). *Making standards stick: A follow-up look at Washington state's school improvement efforts in 1999–2000.* Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education. (pages 25–27) Retrieved September 30, 2005, from http://www.crpe.org/pubs/pdf/MakingStandardsStick.pdf

[9] Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading change.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press. (page 133)

[10] Mentzer, D., & Shaughnessy, T. (2005). Hawthorne Academy: The teachers' perspective. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 10*(2), 157–164.

[11] The curriculum was called Core Knowledge, which, like the early reforms at Patterson, later became the basis for a comprehensive school reform model. For more information, visit the Core Knowledge Foundation Web site at www.coreknowledge.org

[12] Mentzer, D., & Shaughnessy, T. (2005). Hawthorne Academy: The teachers' perspective. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 10*(2), 159.

[13] Collins, J. C., & Porras, J. I. (1994). *Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies.* New York: HarperCollins. (page 9) Of course, the point is not that strategy doesn't matter at all. As we explained in the second brief of this series, getting a successful improvement effort off the ground requires a great deal of collaborative, strategic problem solving. The point here is that not even the most intelligent corporate leaders—or for that matter, school administrators and teachers—can see far enough into the future to craft a successful strategy spanning decades, nor can they anticipate problems that will need to be solved seven, 10, or 12 years hence.

[14] Collins, J. C., & Porras, J. I. (1994). *Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies.* New York: HarperCollins. (page 8)

[15] Century, J. R., & Levy, A. J. (2002, Summer). Sustaining your reform: Five lessons from research. *Benchmarks, 3*(3), 2–3.

[16] Collins, J. C., & Porras, J. I. (1994). Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. (pages 140–141)

[17] Quoted in NewSchools Venture Fund. (2004, May). NewSchools Venture Fund summit 2004. (page 26) Available at http://www.newschools.org/network/Summit2004.pdf.

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[19] Mentzer, D., & Shaughnessy, T. (2005). Hawthorne Academy: The teachers' perspective. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 10*(2), 161–162.

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[22] Personal interview, June 15, 2005.

[23] Mentzer, D., & Shaughnessy, T. (2005). Hawthorne Academy: The teachers' perspective. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 10*(2), 163–164.

[24] Collins, J. C., & Porras, J. I. (1994). *Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies.* New York: HarperCollins. (page 10)

[25] Collins, J. C., & Porras, J. I. (1994). *Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies.* New York: HarperCollins. (page 183)

[26] Schlechty, P. C. *Creating the capacity to support innovations: Occasional paper #2.* Louisville, KY: Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform. (pages 13–14) Retrieved September 30, 2005, from http://www.schlechtycenter.org/pdfs/supportinn.pdf

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[28] Personal interview, June 15, 2005.

[29] Chrisman, V. (2005). How schools sustain success. *Educational Leadership, 62*(5), 16–21.

[30] Mentzer, D., & Shaughnessy, T. (2005). Hawthorne Academy: The teachers' perspective. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 10*(2), 157.

[31] Core Knowledge Foundation. (2005.) Nathaniel Hawthorne Academy. Charlottesville, VA: Author. Retrieved September 30, 2005, from http://www.coreknowledge.org/CK/about/research/Hawthorne.pdf

[32] Personal interview, June 15, 2005.

About the Center's Policy Briefs

This is the last in a series of four policy briefs to be published by The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement in 2005. The briefs are intended to provide fresh insights and useful advice to policymakers and school assistance providers.

This year's four-part series is structured around The Center's emphasis on school improvement and reform as a collaborative, schoolwide cycle of activities: (1) organizing for improvement, (2) planning for improvement, (3) implementing improvement plans, and (4) sustaining improvement efforts. Each publication addresses one of those areas and builds upon the ideas and strategies discussed in the preceding briefs. Therefore, we recommend reading them in order and using them in concert.

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