



LESSONS IN LEARNING

Changing our schools:
Implementing successful
educational reform

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Large-scale educational reform—systemic approaches to changing the way schools operate—helps to meet students’ learning needs more effectively. These approaches focus on reorganizing entire school systems, rather than implementing individual school-improvement initiatives.

Such reforms require a significant investment of resources and—if unsuccessful—risk wasting students’ and teachers’ time and damaging learning outcomes. Thus, what lessons can be drawn from previous attempts at educational reform, and how can these help shape future reform efforts in Canada?

Educational reform programs around the world

A number of jurisdictions around the world have recently implemented large-scale educational reforms. For example:

- A school reform program was introduced in Japan to diversify some aspects of the education system, introduce parental choice, foster greater autonomy for schools, and encourage the use of individualized teaching methods.¹
- In England, widespread concern regarding low academic standards and achievement scores prompted a reform program that included the introduction of a national curriculum and new national-assessment systems.²
- In the United States, the Comprehensive School Reform Program (part of No Child Left Behind) was designed to improve student achievement by helping schools to implement evidence-based reforms.³

Several recent examples of large-scale educational reform can also be found in jurisdictions across Canada.

In Manitoba, the Kindergarten to Senior 4 Education Agenda for Student Success was developed to address six specific priorities:

1. Improving outcomes, especially for less-successful learners.
2. Strengthening links among schools, families and communities.
3. Strengthening school planning and reporting.
4. Improving professional learning opportunities for educators.
5. Strengthening pathways among secondary schools, post-secondary education and work.
6. Linking policy and practice to research and evidence.⁴

In Quebec, educational reforms are being gradually implemented over a 10-year period. These reforms include extensive changes to the provincial curriculum and to the organization of schools, as well as new approaches to evaluation, special education and complementary educational services.⁵

In Ontario, the Student Success/Learning to 18 strategy was designed to ensure that every student is provided with the tools to successfully complete their secondary schooling and reach their post-secondary goals, whether these goals involve apprenticeships, college, university or the workplace. The strategy was

designed to meet five goals focused on the secondary-school system:

1. Increase graduation rates.
2. Support positive outcomes for all students.
3. Provide students with new and relevant learning opportunities.
4. Build on students' strengths and interests.
5. Ease the transition between elementary school and secondary school.⁶

Barriers to successful implementation of educational reform

The implementation of large-scale school reforms often takes time, is met with resistance or controversy, and faces systemic barriers. Educational change is a slow process that requires adequate time and resources, but decision-makers often wish to see rapid results.⁷ Educational reform efforts have typically moved through pendulum-like cycles, swinging back and forth between different ideologies.⁸ As a result, critics have argued that reforms are based on educational trends rather than evidence, are implemented too hastily, and are without effective assessment systems.^{9,10,11} As well, reform attempts are often criticized for excluding teachers from the decision-making process.^{12,13}

Lessons in Learning: Implementing effective educational reform programs

These common criticisms point to the importance of considering empirical evidence when initiating large-scale educational reform programs, and of the need for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the impact of change. Overall, the evidence is clear that comprehensive educational reform programs can be much more effective than more targeted initiatives that are focused more narrowly on students at risk of school failure.¹⁴

The research on large-scale educational reform is still at a relatively early stage, and it remains difficult to draw clear lessons from the overall body of research. For example, a recent meta-analysis of 232 studies conducted in the United States on the achievements of such programs highlighted four key features of educational reform:

1. Ongoing professional development for teachers and other staff.
2. Measure goals for student learning.
3. Acceptance and “buy-in” of the reform program among school staff.
4. Use of specific instructional practices designed to improve learning.

While these features are clearly important to the successful implementation of reform programs, they represent concepts that are difficult to measure. Moreover, their individual and combined contributions to improved learning outcomes remain unclear.¹⁵

An Australian study of 25 schools recognized as working innovatively to engage students revealed five key principals of successful reform:

1. Early intervention is best.
2. Schools need to ensure that interventions are sustained.
3. Schools need to adopt multifaceted approaches.
4. Context sensitivity is essential.
5. Supportive school cultures greatly improve effectiveness.¹⁶

A Canadian Council on Learning evaluation of Ontario's Student Success/ Learning to 18 strategy (*Evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of Education's Student Success / Learning to 18 Strategy*, located at www.ccl-cca.ca) also highlights several features of educational reform that have contributed to improved outcomes (e.g., higher graduation rates) among Ontario high-school students:

1. Systemic change depends on a range of governmental supports.
2. Change requires the concurrence and involvement of those responsible for implementing the changes.
3. The strategy focuses on according equal respect to all post-secondary destinations, including immediate employment, apprenticeship, college enrolment and university enrolment.
4. Schools provide students with opportunities to explore the connections between what they learn in school and future employment or study.
5. Schools credit student accomplishments and build upon these accomplishments to help students overcome the barriers they have yet to master.
6. Schools work to eliminate or minimize the difficulties that students face in transitioning from one level of education to the next.
7. Schools work to accommodate the different ways in which students learn.
8. Schools attempt to actively engage students and enable them to persist in school despite the challenges they may face.

Large-scale educational reforms are costly and potentially risky. Despite the challenges of drawing definitive research-based conclusions, recent Canadian and international evidence suggests a range of promising strategic elements—from the importance of governmental supports, to building upon student strengths and maximizing their engagement in the learning process.

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