

# **Sustaining System-Wide School Reform: Implications of Perceived Purpose and Efficacy in Team Members**

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*Recognizing there is a paucity of recent information specifically focusing on sustainable change to draw upon, this study sought to explore and expand understanding of the topic while examining the long-term outcomes of a comprehensive reform effort in an American southwest urban school district. The primary focus of interviews employed in the study was to determine the ways in which leadership was successful in sustaining change, along with gaining insight into areas of struggle. Findings from the study reveal important insights into the personal nature of change, and its impact on leaderships efforts. Along with offering implications for practice, implications for future study are provided as well.*

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Reform, continuous improvement, innovation, transformation, and turn-around are terms that have become part of the everyday lexicon of teachers and administrators in American public schools. Each school year seems to bring new calls for educators to adapt the ways in which they do their work. Educators are regularly asked to implement new academic standards, use different instructional materials, master alternative teaching methods, comply with revised funding models, and meet the requirements of different accountability systems at the state and federal levels.

These initiatives represent just a few of the possible calls to adapt practice that educators may face from year to year. Whether the call is labeled a reform, innovation, improvement, or transformation, and whether that call requires practices to be adapted at the classroom, school, or district level, it is certain that educators will be called upon to change what they do – and likely how they view things - in the name of making things better for students and their learning.

The other glaring questions that just continue to grow are, what does it mean to be better? What is the purpose of these educational changes, and similarly what is the motivation for educators to engage in them? Why should educators invest the time, energy, and effort required to change, especially if the entire tone of that effort is consistently steeped in feelings of compliance (Fullan, 2014) more so than progress? Further, and especially in that light, how can education leaders create and sustain change that is meaningful without overwhelming students, teachers and the community? This case study was an exploratory undertaking that had immediate value to the cooperating district, while also offering important considerations for current practice as well as future study.

In the past, as it will continue moving forward, the pursuit of meaningful change has long been a constant in American public schooling. The scholarly literature connected with it shows perceived needs linked to changing popular views, increasingly complex societal needs, as well as continually evolving philosophies of education. While researchers vary in how they have examined change as well as in how they have measured the impact of change over time, it is clear that the quest for change has been, and will continue to be, a constant in American public schooling.

Long a student of these changes, Fullan (2014) has referenced the strong barrier created by the compliance mentality that has grabbed ahold of schools and change efforts as result of the accountability movement in place during the past generation or so. Barriers like these appear to have perhaps contributed to a narrowed instructional focus and possibly even underdeveloped leadership in instances. The impact of this tightened focus on leadership, school reform in general, and finally upon the notion of continuous improvement are all important considerations that need be accounted for before delving into the concept of sustaining improvement.

Due to the magnitude of the topic, much of the existing research is “cause and effect” in focus, typically attempting to provide indisputable evidence of immediate success, that validates one single element or approach, and less frequently turning such attention at all toward long-term implications. Therein, much of the literature considers structural decisions in great depth, often spelling out the implications more so of managerial decisions than anything else.

By looking more deliberately and more closely for insights about how leadership practices impact the sustainability of continuous improvement efforts, this study sought to provide education leaders, both current and future, with necessary insights that could help increase their capacity to create and sustain meaningful and beneficial change. The literature on sustainability will be addressed following initial examination of school leadership and its connection to mandated school reforms and the resulting impacts on continuous improvement.

## **Relevant Literature**

Though this study was concerned most directly with the sustainability of school improvement, it is understood that improvement whether it be sustainable or not, does not take place in a vacuum. Fullan (2014) has long explored and described the complexities of leading school improvement efforts, and has recently brought to light the barrier created by a compliance mentality imposed upon schools during the past 20 years. This mentality is burdensome in many ways. Clearly it limits attention to promising instructional potential focuses (Mausbach and Morrison, 2017), and can ultimately even challenge leaderships' perceptions of their own overall efficacy (Whitt, Scheurich and Skrla, 2015). Self-doubt and questioned empowerment can undermine the development of much needed leadership in a multitude of settings and under a broad range of circumstances. Ultimately accountability and the resulting compliance mentality can result in underdevelopment of leaders and reform efforts as they are seemingly so clearly obligated to "stay in the box" at all costs and never stretch to grow outside of the accountability framework.

### **School Reform and Progress or Compliance**

According to Bae (2018) and Fullan (2014) school-based accountability and an ensuing compliance mindset emerged in the mid 1990, and has only continued to intensify since. Harris (2014) expressed ongoing concern about accountability requirements interfering with successful instruction, and has affirmed that success and continuous improvement strongly depends upon the contributions of more local focus and vision to integrate administrative insights and supports. Gregory Harman, Boden, Karpenski, Muchowicz (2016) have documented the failure of the mandate driven accountability focus through their in-depth study of No Child Left Behind long-term results. Continuous effort in satisfying a mandate where there is no gain is anything but continuous improvement, and their findings consistently revealed no improvement whatsoever resulting from NCLB approaches employed across all of Illinois.

Both Fullan (2014) and Gregory Harman et. al ((2016) have labeled mandated accountability a failed experiment in large part because the compliance mentality associated with it stunts forward thinking leadership in favor of stagnated "one-sized" instructional approaches that do not appear to meet any needs. While sustainability is highly sought after throughout all of the assorted school improvement efforts, Gregory Harman, et. al (2016) have demonstrated insightfully how mandates and compliance to them fail to generate outcomes even worth attempting to sustain. Sustaining success takes something more, and in as much as that "something more" has been overshadowed by calls for accountability for decades now, it is important to look deeper into features, factors and leadership characteristics that can put school improvement efforts on the correct track – and then keep them there.

### **Literature on Sustainability**

The literature is clear that meaningful and lasting change is rarely the result of mandates (Smith and Stevenson, 2017), or simply good fortune, and more so can only realistically be achieved through careful planning along with deliberate and well executed leadership. Though there is not a single overriding definition of sustainability repeated across the literature, there are some important themes and trends that deserve mention. Datnow (2005) speaks less about specific

timelines, and more so equates sustainability with having reached a point with an initiative where it has become “institutionalized” and a recurring everyday feature of an organization.

Sanders (2012) similarly did not relate sustainability to a timeframe either, but instead identified what she believed were discreet stages progressing toward sustainability that were also independent of time. This construct holds that first come the establishment and maturation phases where elements are introduced and nurtured, respectively. Ultimately these give way to the evolution stage which notably is not anything about “having arrived” with an initiative, but more so denotes continued growth and more so a synthesis of ideas, opportunities and success.

Coburn, Russell, Kaufman, and Stein (2012) connected sustainability to the central challenge of improving instruction for the past 30 years. While Bean, Dole, Nelson, Belcastro, and Zigmond, (2015) contributed that sustainability is not just an end point, but rather must be envisioned and worked toward continuously throughout implementation. Edwards and Gammell (2016) stressed that effective leadership need not be from the top, but more so could be just as dynamic were it distributed. Cherkowski (2012) contributed findings and a point of view that nurturing leadership can increase a commitment and passion within staff that is vital for fostering sustainable teams and initiatives.

All of these insights and elements contribute to the scope of the investigation that is being described here, and help to draw attention to the wonderful complexity of meaningful change. As the literature largely lacking recent articles on the subject relates, the concept of sustainability does not receive the attention in education it did say approximately 10 years ago. This timeframe corresponds to the overwhelming emergence of standards and compliance mentality, which has perhaps in some places taken over the long-term objective for schools, and shoved sustainability thinking into a back corner.

Still, as was highlighted in Smith and Stevenson’s study (2017) while some may equate mandates with long-term success, striving for compliance is not even close to the same thing as initiating and sustaining efforts aimed at achieving excellence. The growing silence on the topic at hand only makes this study all the more relevant. Exploring the fabric of sustainability down to the subtle insights and perceived nuisances shared privately in repeated individual interviews was a mission of necessity for anyone who already knows the importance and complexity of pursuing meaningful change in education.

### **Pursuing Meaningful Change**

Change being attempted solely for the sake of change or appeasing mandates is seldom associated with any long-term meaning. Though the frequency and urgency with which change is brought up in any philosophical discussion about school effectiveness suggests otherwise, the pursuit of truly meaningful and lasting change has been a constant in American public school for generations. This more honorable and tenable position is consistently represented within the literature on education reform and accompanying changes. While researchers vary in how they have examined change as well as in how they have measured the impact of change over time, it is clear that change has been, and will continue to be, a constant in American public schooling regardless of setting or circumstance.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Though change is challenging anywhere, the topic takes on new meaning in settings and

circumstances where education is perceived to be falling behind. There is a problem in American public-school districts serving low-income and language-minority students; many innovative school reforms are introduced, some are implemented, but few are sustained (Bean et al., 2015; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Datnow, 2005). As a result, little is known about what leaders can do to sustain reforms that are truly meaningful for these schools and communities. This lack of understanding appears also to have a negative impact on the ability of school leaders to create continued improvement as well as increased instructional effectiveness over time, and to do so with a great sense of efficacy in low income and minority settings.

### **Reform Partnership Initiative (RPI)**

In 2008, a school district in a large city in the American southwest was issued a failing label by its state due to persistently lagging student achievement. At that time, they were presented with the possibility of an innovation-focused reform option from a potential partner. administrators had few other leads that held any promise (WestEd, 2011), and the district entered into a collaborative Reform Partnership Initiative (RPI will serve as the pseudonym for this project throughout this article). Linked with significant outside financial resources supplied by its new partner, the district was buoyed with expert technical knowledge from a prominent national research and development organization, and supported in their endeavor by a private Arizona foundation (WestEd, 2011). The intent of the partnership was to create district-wide improvement through the implementation of specific, systematic changes in the leadership practices, instructional strategies, and the curriculum and assessment resources of the entire school district (WestEd, 2011). These changes were to become a model of sustainable reform that could be replicated to transform other underperforming districts in the future (WestEd, 2011).

The partnership was established in 2008 as the Reform Partnership Initiative (RPI) and concluded in 2014 with notable results. Between the initial implementation period in 2008 and the height of the RPI reform efforts in 2011, students' passing rates on Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) in both reading and mathematics increased at a rate greater than the state average. Reading achievement, in particular, increased at six times greater than the state average (ADE, 2015, WestEd, 2011). When the focus shifted from implementation to sustainability in 2012, the achievement of the district's students began to decline slightly but remained within nine-points of the state average. Table 1 illustrates the change in passing rates for students in the district spanning the years between initial reform implementation and the partnership's conclusion in 2014.

Table 1  
*Percentage of Students Passing AIMS 2010-2014*

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
District Reading	58	64	61	60	60
AZ Reading	64	65	65	68	69
District Math	34	36	36	37	35

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(ADE, 2015).

### **Local Expectations**

In as much as the short-term focus was visibly tasked with improving test scores, it was understood that desired long-term outcome was to create a sustainable approach to comprehensive school improvement. WestEd (2011) described the implementation of the partnership's reforms as a "transformative process," and was credited with helping to initiate across the district "a culture that is very positive, very upbeat" (p. 7). Striving for a long-term solution, numerous "cutting edge" changes were introduced in the areas of curriculum and assessment. These were linked to training to drive improved practices in the areas of instructional practice and building level leadership and instructional guidance within the district.

New expectations for teachers included requirements to implement research-based instructional practices for all learners. Specific attention was directed toward providing differentiated language acquisition strategies for English learners. All instructional coaches and administrators were expected to use specific methods of instructional coaching that they were provided training in. Standards addressing the amount of time administrators and coaches were to be present in classrooms were established and implemented. A set of curriculum maps and pacing calendars were developed and implemented across the district. In addition, weekly common formative assessments were administered to all students in reading and mathematics and all teachers held weekly data analysis meetings to review the results and plan for remediation instruction.

As the partnership concluded, however, many questions remained regarding how the meaningful changes that were implemented during the partnership would be sustained. It was not difficult to see how a flood of positive attention and much needed intervention could impact short-term test results. From the early moments of originally discussing the partnership on through full implementation it was understood that designing adaptations would be easy in comparison to getting them accepted and on their way to becoming sustainable.

### **Purpose of the Study**

While the motivations behind reforms are well documented, there is a paucity of recent research specifically addressing the sustainability of long-term school improvement efforts. Building on early reporting of sustainable leadership practices completed by Hargreaves and Fink (2004), the purpose of this study was to examine leadership factors impacting sustainability of reform efforts targeted through the Reform Partnership Initiative (RPI) established in 2008. As was noted already, while there was intense and visible focus on adopting new instructional and assessment strategies, there was also significant investment directed toward improved leadership and coaching practices. In combination, all of these practices were intended to help shape the efforts of future school administrators who similarly aimed to launch and maintain sustainable school reform efforts.

## **Research Design and Procedures**

This research project employed a case study methodology, which is a part of the family of descriptive education research. Data were acquired through the use of individual interviews conducted with practitioners who participated in the implementation of the reforms during the partnership. Field notes were also collected and artifacts including internal communications and professional development materials referred to by the interview participants were reviewed. Using a holistic method of analysis, data were coded and theoretical themes related to the sustainability of reform identified. These themes revealed specific information about factors contributing to the sustainability of the reforms. They also provided a deeper understanding of the comprehensive reform partnership itself as learning outcomes and long-term attitudes were easier to see and link well after the completion of the project.

### **Population and Sampling**

Continuity was a critical consideration for developing and implementing this project. Similarly, in establishing expectations for potential participants for interview, continuity was again vital. For the purposes of this study, a local participant was defined as one having at minimum three years of continuous employment with the district. Similarly, for agents working for WestEd, there was the expectation of at least three years of association with the organization, in addition to at least three years of engagement with the partnership being examined.

A leader was operationally defined as being either a direct supervisor or someone else having influence on the participant's work, habits, attitudes and perceptions. This operational distinction is important to note upfront as it was not necessarily expected to correspond completely to more individual perceptions that might be shared about leaders and leadership in the organization and as it pertained to this project.

The population for this case study included the administrators and teachers in nine elementary schools who participated in the reform partnership. In addition, school coaches and program coordinators from WestEd were also included. Representatives from the Ellis Center for Educational Excellence were excluded because the organization no longer existed.

Purposive sampling was employed by the researcher to select representative administrators and teachers from the focus district, as well as staff from WestEd. Specific criteria for membership in the sample included:

- A minimum of 3 years of continuous employment or association with one of the partnership organizations between school years 2008-09 and 2013-14.
- A minimum of 3 years of engagement with the partnership.
- Ability to provide information about the details of the case.
- Continued employment with one of the participating organizations.

### **Sources of Information**

A total of 16 one-on-one interviews producing nearly 20 hours of continuous audio recording and 250 pages of transcripts were completed, and augmented by 120 pages of field notes as well as numerous artifacts documenting communications and support materials. In many instances artifacts were used to validate participant perceptions. Interview participants were identified using the population and sampling criteria referenced earlier. Participants chosen included the

membership described in Table 2:

Table 2

*Participant Demographics*

Participant Group	Number of Participants	Comment
WestEd Staff	3	One member of this group changed roles since their original involvement in RPI
CESD Principals	3	Positions were distributed across all involved grade levels
CESD Teachers – Grades K-8		Four members of this group changed roles since their original involvement in the RPI
• Group A Grades K-2	4	
• Group B Grades 3-5	3	
• Group C Grades 6-8	3	

### Findings

Research questions and the findings they generated were intended and designed to provide comprehensive examination of and insight into the perceptions, motivations and contributions of assorted stakeholders associated with the RPI. Questions were developed after reviewing the described targets for the district-wide initiative, and linking these targets to short-term bench marks. Taking more of a long-term viewpoint in this study, questions sought to uncover new information, particularly that having to do with participants' perceptions and attitudes concerning the potential benefits of the partnership and intervention.

#### **Research Question 1. What did participants perceive the goals of the Reform Partnership Initiative to be?**

At a surface level, it could be argued that there was some basic underlying level of agreement concerning the intended outcome of the RPI partnership. Ultimately all stakeholders recognized the emphasis that was being placed on improving student achievement and district attainment of academic standing gains. At a deeper level, however, study participants perceived the goals of the RPI differently depending on their role in the reform. While feedback supported that the overall goals of the RPI were perceived to be improving curriculum, instruction and assessment systems, fostering adult learning, improving student achievement and addressing external mandates, there were differences of opinion attributed to what they meant.

WestEd staff and principals both perceived that the goals of the RPI were to continuously improve curriculum, instruction and assessment systems and processes. Whereas, teachers primarily saw the goals as fostering adult learning and addressing external mandates imposed on a failing school district. Viewed largely as a corrective action plan, it was accepted and understood by one teacher to be an intervention implemented to avoid being taken over by the state because of failing test scores.

Despite the differences in perceptions of the specific underlying long-term objectives, the majority of participants did perceive that the goals, as they were stated, were achieved. However, some teachers and even principals noted that while the goals were achieved, the methods, referred to by participants as “delivery” could be considered ineffective. These participants cited multiple



sources of evidence to support their conclusions about the goals of the RPI. This evidence included improved accountability labels and test scores, their own ability to implement useful practices and their own perceptions about student preparation for the next grade level.

### **Research Question 2. Who did participants in the Reform Partnership Initiative perceive as the leaders of the reform?**

Study participants perceived the leaders of the RPI differently depending on their role in the organization and/or their role in the reform. Overall, teachers tended to view leadership differently than did those in administrative or consulting roles. Professionals who the participants identified as leaders included site principals, site instructional coaches, WestEd coaches, WestEd project directors or executives, and the Assistant Superintendent. Participants cited the following attributes when describing why they identified their leaders as they did: having the ability to make concepts relevant, practical and hands on, having relevant content knowledge and experience, and having the ability to create nurturing and/or supportive relationships. Teachers were consistently more likely to view this question in terms of titles and labels, more so interchanging the ideas of a “boss” with leadership.

### **Research Question 3. Which reform elements did participants in the Reform Partnership Initiative perceive as sustained?**

Perceptions about sustainability were based on those elements believed to be introduced through RPI, and how evident an element was in the participants’ present-day work, and how they rated them. A listing of these elements and information on the category the element belonged to is found in Table 3. Participants ultimately rated the sustainability of the elements and indicated that they were either:

- Still evident but less frequent
- Still evident and reflective of strategies learned during the RPI
- Still evident and less frequent but with greater focus
- Still evident and a positive fit with focus and instruction

Participants across groups consistently perceived classroom observations as still evident but less frequent and more focused. In some cases, participants referred to the classroom observations as indicating consistent use of other strategies from the RPI. Participants also consistently felt that “Instructional Strategies to Support all Learners” were somewhat evident, and used in professional development planning, lesson planning, and in some cases classroom lessons themselves. Teachers especially referred to setting lesson objectives and engaging students when describing their perceptions about the strategies.

Participants also consistently indicated that professional learning communities (PLCs) were still evident, in some reality or another. Some participants indicated that PLCs were still focused on data analysis and lesson planning. Others indicated that the PLCs were now more focused on professional development and program implementation.

Finally, participants indicated common formative assessments (CFAs), while still evident, are used far less frequently than during the RPI. Participants also consistently felt that the curriculum essentials were still evident and used to guide both the implementation of academic standards as well as current areas of professional focus, such as questioning and discussion techniques.

Table 3  
*Elements Introduced During RPI*

Name of Reform Element	Type of Element
Frequent classroom observations by principals and instructional coaches	Curriculum/Instruction
Instructional Practices to Support all Learners	Curriculum/Instruction
Teacher participation in Professional Learning Communities	Organizational
Systematic use of Common Formative Assessments	Curriculum/Instruction
Implementation of Math Pathways and Pitfalls	Curriculum/Instruction
Development and implementation of Curriculum Essentials	Curriculum/Instruction
Sustainability visits by WestEd and district office personnel	Organizational

**Research Question 4. Which reform elements did participants in the Reform Partnership Initiative perceive as not sustained?**

While participants perceived the majority of the elements of the RPI to have been sustained in some manner and to at least some extent, there were two specific elements that participants consistently perceived as having not been sustained. Those elements were Math Pathways and Pitfalls and sustainability visits.

Math Pathways and Pitfalls was a very specific curricular approach implemented during RPI, and was the element most consistently identified as not sustained. Most participants indicated that it was either not applicable to their role any longer, or that it was not evident in their work. Teachers did describe the materials, including books and posters, as still being present and available, but few described them as being actively used in such a way that would indicate the practice had become an institutionalized part of their work.

Less a curricular innovation and more of a leadership/organizational approach to ensure continuity, sustainability visits were carried out by district and WestEd staff, and were intended to prevent decisions from passively receiving buy in, then ultimately disappearing on the back shelf in classrooms. All participants indicated that sustainability visits were not sustained or in any way present in the work of the school. While teachers and administrators left the observation at that, WestEd staff cited the disappearance of the approach as the loss of an essential element for school transformation. A perceived lack of support from district administration was singled out as the chief contributor to the disappearance of the important approach.

**Research Question 5. What actions of reform leaders did the Reform Partnership Initiative participants perceive as having contributed to the sustainability of reform elements?**

As with preceding research questions 3 and 4, participants were asked to reflect individually on each of the seven elements from Table 3 originally introduced by the RPI reform. In this case the focus was less on the elements themselves and more on the visible supportive leadership actions

participants witnessed. In all cases, participants perceived many of their leaders' actions as having contributed to the sustainability of reform elements. Keep in mind that different participants had different mindsets about who leaders were. In all seven themes with thirty-eight descriptors were identified. Table 4 summarizes the seven individual themes, with associated leadership actions listed beneath.

Table 4

*Supportive Leadership Actions*

<p>Establishing and communicating expectations about the reform element</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holding and communicating shared high expectations for instructional use of elements</li> <li>• Providing consistency, direction and flexibility</li> <li>• Providing advance notice when the element is going to be observed</li> </ul>	<p>Creating opportunities for people to deeply learn about the reform element</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training and trusting staff to deepen their understanding and set the agenda within the reform element</li> <li>• Feeling open to, seeking and valuing feedback</li> <li>• Building competence through preparation</li> </ul>
<p>Appreciating, encouraging, and supporting people and the reform element</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being supportive and encouraging</li> <li>• Appreciating the element and associated training and materials</li> <li>• Praising, being positive, encouraging</li> </ul>	<p>Working collaboratively with people to implement the reform element</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging in dialogue to build shared understanding</li> <li>• Modeling with adults first and learning together</li> </ul>
<p>Making the reform element practical now and in the future</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing training, modeling and making it practical and feel routine</li> <li>• Focusing on standards</li> <li>• Building capacity and tools to support future work</li> </ul>	<p>Trusting people to work with and make sense of the reform element</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trusting staff to implement the reform element and support each other</li> <li>• Trusting autonomy to implement, be accountable and fix mistakes</li> </ul>
<p>Using data to inform people about the element, its implementation and effects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making data useful</li> </ul>	

Without question the participants valued clear, positive and trusting communication, especially about high-level expectations that the organization was striving for. They saw merit to building up the elements of the intervention, giving them a chance to be understood, and also even letting people become comfortable with them. They also valued having access to and ability to use data in order to make informed choices, and a certain amount of autonomy in implementing elements of the reform effort.

With such an extensive, even exhaustive list, it would appear as though there was a tremendous amount of momentum and investment from leadership to bring about legitimate reform and make it sustainable. Appropriately the next question focuses on the alternate side of these behaviors as participants uncovered both positive and negative leadership qualities during their interviews.

**Research Question 6. What actions of reform leaders did the Reform Partnership Initiative participants perceive as having detracted from the sustainability of reform elements?**

Participants perceived that while the majority of the reform elements were sustained, there were some that were not, and not all people perceived each element to be fully sustained. Participants identified specific actions by leaders that detracted from the sustainability of the elements. These actions are categorized according to the following themes in Table 5.

Table 5

*Detracting Leadership Actions*

Approaching the reform element superficially <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking an impersonal or checklist approach</li> <li>• Compliance approach / forcing elements to fit</li> <li>• Addressing invaluable or impractical topics</li> <li>• Excessive workload and testing</li> </ul>	Making people feel threatened <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparing teacher and school results</li> <li>• Being undermined in front of students</li> <li>• Feeling like a failure or violated</li> </ul>
Being absent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withdrawing from the process</li> <li>• Being disconnected</li> </ul>	Impacting time negatively. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling rushed and/or behind and overwhelmed</li> </ul>
Impacting wellness negatively <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not celebrating growth</li> <li>• Impacting sensibilities negatively</li> </ul>	Overwhelming people <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling overwhelmed / contributing to feelings of overwhelm</li> </ul>
Not prioritizing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wrestling with other leaders about purpose</li> <li>• Struggling with competing priorities</li> </ul>	Undermining people or the reform element. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impacting prior knowledge and experience negatively</li> </ul>

Response to this question provide quite a contrast to responses from Research Question 5. Taken together they give anyone interested in pursuing sustainability a lot to think about. The primary question that comes up is whether the differences represented here correspond to different attitudes about the same people, or reflect different leadership styles among different leaders. If there is “no winning” with some people, then it would almost seem to be a lock that a fairly even dose of good and bad will be the descriptor in any setting. Whereas, there is also the possibility that there were leadership winners and losers being represented in these results. In any case, it is pretty clear that less than genuine investment in a project of this nature stands out and has the potential to undermine a lot of good that may have been taking place along the same time.

**Research Question 7. How did the actions of reform leaders affect the Reform Partnership Initiative participants’ perceptions of themselves as leaders?**

After reviewing participants’ responses to this question, it was discovered that not all participants identified themselves as leaders and that teachers were least likely to identify themselves as leaders. However, among participants who did identify themselves as leaders, which included

teachers, principals and WestEd staff, they all perceived that their leaders' actions had impacted their own perceptions of themselves as leaders in some way.

Participants felt that their leaders' actions during the RPI did have an effect on their own self-perceptions as leaders. For some participants, the aligned interview question related to this research question was difficult to respond to because it required a level of self-reflection and analysis that was not present in the other interview questions. While some participants did not identify themselves as leaders, at some level and in some way most did. Those who identified as leaders shared that their leaders' actions had impacted them by creating within them a feeling of being trusted, having some autonomy and a sense of being empowered to lead. Participants also felt that their leaders pushed them to grow and learn as leaders. In addition, participants indicated that their leader caused them to shift their focus away from accountability driven leadership to a leadership style focused on true learning. In contrast, present among a minority of participants, was the perception that they were not fulfilled as leaders and that their leaders had not been able to help them fully realize their leadership potential.

**Feeling trusted, autonomous and empowered to lead.** Participants who perceived themselves as leaders consistently agreed that at some point during the RPI their leader trusted in them to lead effectively or to work independently. They also agreed that they had been empowered by their leader through opportunities to learn or deepen their understanding. They further agreed that their leader had given them some level of autonomy in their role.

**Feeling pushed to grow and learn.** Participants who perceived themselves as leaders also indicated that during the partnership their leaders had pushed them toward new learning. This learning was in a variety of areas including instruction strategies, content and leadership practices around coaching and professional development.

**Feeling a shift in focus from accountability to true learning.** Some principals indicated that their leaders helped them move beyond an initial focus on accountability toward a more comprehensive view of teaching and learning. For one principal, the shift occurred gradually through the coaching process and through conversations about classroom observations and practice. For the other principal, the shift occurred as the principal resisted the impact of what were perceived as external forces that sought to change fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning. In both cases, the principals emerged with a new understanding about teaching and learning even as the high-stakes and high-accountability context in which the RPI ultimately concluded.

**Feeling as though leadership potential was unfulfilled.** Both a principal and a teacher indicated some degree of dissatisfaction or lack of fulfillment of leadership potential. The principal acknowledged the desire to do better and to be more effective as a leader. The teacher reflected on the words of a former principal who asked the teacher to become a leader among the teacher's peers. However, even as the teacher initially reflected that the teacher was not a leader, the teacher began to see how the teacher's role had changed. The teacher now provided leadership to middle school colleagues and provided regular guidance on instructional needs. The teacher committed to doing more to actively provide leadership in a collegial capacity.

### **Summary of Findings**

Covering in excess of 20 hours of recorded description, along with hundreds of pages from field notes and artifacts including communications and supporting materials, it is a daunting challenge to compress the most significant insights uncovered through this study into only a few pages, and

now only a few paragraphs. Starting with strengths and weaknesses, the findings revealed that pretty uniformly any genuine effort at implementing improvements with educational practice will communicate that there is interest in improving learning. This finding from RQ1 gave way to a next question that has elements of clarity and uncertainty to it. In response to RQ2, many participants, particularly from the classroom, viewed leadership along traditional positional “titled” lines. That being said, there was emerging awareness resulting from the RPI and subsequent follow-up that leadership did not have to have such a limited function. This was already evident to many of the other participants according to their descriptions.

To some extent it seemed that curriculum modifications and innovations had some chance of sticking around after the RPI window, unless it had to do with math. It could be argued in response to RQ3 and RQ4 that “things” often have an easier time holding their place than do complex social dynamics, like leadership and related natural, coached or perhaps trained behaviors. In truth, there were elements both from curriculum and leadership coming from both the RQ3 sustained and RQ4 not sustained voices. Stepping back and taking these items in with the bigger picture of the entire study, however, there does seem to be evidence that “things” often have an easier time holding their place. In as much as they may not lose as much ground, they probably do not stand to make as much headway either. All of this represents the complexity and risk involved in sustainable improvements to our schools.

The responses to RQ5 and RQ6 give reason to pause and question just how such distinct opposite behaviors were reported from a narrow pool of participants in just a single study. Did the perceptions held by individuals vary despite seeing the same things? Perhaps the responses reflect different abilities and behaviors exhibited by different leaders. In any case, a very clear roadmap of behaviors to avoid and those to cultivate clearly emerged from the findings. Communication, credibility and investment are all critical difference makers whether described as being present or gone missing.

Returning to the earlier description of “sustainability” for a moment, RQ7 confirmed that the possibility exists for anyone to be a leader if they believe in the opportunity, believe in themselves, believe in the “mission” and have the trust and faith of others they work with. Those others do not need to be “higher-ups” for leadership to grow. Though higher-ups do need to have faith in others in order for sustainability to flourish. All of these insights, marvelous in both their complexity and their simplicity all at the same time, give way to the following implications for professional practice.

### **Implications for Practice**

Hargreaves and Fink (2004) wrote, “Education leaders want to accomplish goals that matter, inspire others to join them in working toward those goals, and leave a lasting legacy” (p.9). The implications for this study are significant for education leaders seeking to accomplish goals that matter.

**Ensure clarity of goals and communicate goals consistently.** This study revealed that participants in the RPI viewed the goals very differently. These differences in views tended to be based on the role of the participants’ in the partnership. This illustrates the importance of ensuring that goals are clear, understandable and communicated with great consistency throughout an organization. The task of communicating these goals becomes increasingly more complex as a reform involves more stakeholders and elements. However, developing communications tools such as websites, email messages and newsletters can help with providing a consistent opportunity

to communicate about the goals of a complex reform. Personal loop outs from upper level administration can also provide valuable opportunities for dialogue to occur among people who have a variety of roles in a reform. This type of open communication and visibility can help to ensure greater consistency of understanding about the goals and rationale of a reform.

**Develop leadership at all levels.** One of the genuinely significant findings of this study is that leadership does not always equate to having positional or supervisory authority. Leaders are those who establish learning centered priorities, provide opportunities for others to learn, encourage and support others in their work, work alongside others collaboratively and practically as they learn, and trust others to succeed. Therefore, it is important for all within education to understand and accept that as an educator, they have a leadership role. Educators need to realize that someone is looking at them for leadership at all times.

Classroom teachers provided the majority of the perspectives in this study because whether they think so or not, classroom teachers have some of the most significant leadership power in any reform. Classroom teachers can work with each other and their administrators to ensure that priorities for reform are collaboratively developed, clearly communicated and kept alive through regular engagement and data informed progress monitoring. Classroom teachers can also be a significant source of encouragement and positivity for each other, their administrators, their students and their community as they work to guide future reforms and seek to accomplish goals that matter.

**Establish priorities and set expectations in a collaborative manner.** School principals also have significant power to make or break a reform. Some of this power comes from their ability to establish priorities and expectations. This does not mean that they can or should dictate what the priorities and expectations should be. Rather, by working collaboratively with teachers and others to develop a shared set of priorities and expectations, the school principal will be able to help everyone know how best to focus their leadership within the context of a reform.

District-level leaders, while not playing a key role in this study, can also be critical in the process of creating and implementing successful reform. Again, by acting as leaders to establish priorities, helping others to learn and by providing support, guidance, and encouragement, district leaders can be very important. They are in the unique position to stand in the role of reform planning facilitator to ensure that reforms are well developed, planned, communicated and monitored.

**Plan strategically for reforms to succeed.** This strategic planning role cannot be overlooked in the context of a complex reform, especially given the fact that everyone involved has a leadership role to play. Someone, or a group must be responsible for acting as the leader of the reform. This person or group must be equipped with sufficient perspective to view the entire reform comprehensively and plan for its implementation and communication across stakeholder groups. The most logical place for this particular type of leadership is at the district level because of the inherent responsibility to provide oversight and support for multiple schools within a district. Though housed at that level, leadership is required at all levels, and oversight needs to be collaborative and invested in at all levels for any chance at sustainability.

And finally, for organizations such as WestEd that provide external support services to schools and districts globally, the implications for practice are also significant. Providers of external support services can use this information to build the capacity of their executives, directors and school coaches to work more collaboratively to establish clear leadership roles, goals and communications methods to support future projects. Providers of external support services are in a precarious position when coming in to any kind of school or district that is in need of support.

The danger in that work is that the internal stakeholders, the teachers, principals and district administrators, can cede leadership of the reform to the external providers. This not only reduces the short-term workload on the internal stakeholders, but it can also provide them with someone to blame for the challenges that consistently arise during a reform project such as the RPI. This is a seductive combination when the stakes are high.

When leadership is under developed and under shared during a reform, the end result will very likely be that those who are supposed to sustain it after the external support is withdrawn may not own the reform. In those cases, the financial resources, time, energy and effort invested are not wasted, but they will not have the long-term effects that they could have had, had there been leaders skilled in sustainable leadership practices to guide the reform. Moving forward it may be possible to reclaim lost momentum should there be a lapse in leadership. Quite likely, however, lapses could also be expected to raise levels of cynicism internally and restrict future endeavors into a quicksand-like helping of status quo.

### **Implications for Continued Scholarship**

As was suggested in an earlier section, a generation dominated by external accountability and compliance demands seems perhaps to have put some of the professional focus and ensuing literature on sustainability on the back shelf. Sustainability is not easy. It is likely far easier to do what one is told and learn to accept lesser results. Similarly, it is easy to roll out a bunch of mandates each and every year and represent that overall process as being some sort of vision for the future. It appears as though behaviors like these are increasingly being accepted – which is all the more reason why quality scholarship concerning sustainability is more important than ever. It is a disservice to condition our society to accept less when there are better ways to promote and nurture improved education. Looking every to the future, the following possibilities are offered for continuing scholarship on this topic.

- Explore the obvious question simply and empirically – has compliance taken the driver’s seat away from sustainability? This is a question that could be directed at perceptions in the field, in training institutions, professional associations, and even among those who are responsible for setting standards for various professions. It would be especially interesting to see what legislators across the country thought of such a question.
- Explore the impact of “immediate” need and how it might influence the fabric of leadership and sustainability. The district described in this project was in danger of failing. There was a real “Good to Great” situation in place. In some ways, that probably helped to even launch the initiative being studied. In other ways, it probably corresponds to some deficits and doubts that were already in place in the organization. It is a fair question to ask how things work in places that might not be in the same level of need as the organization that was studied here.
- Explore differences between buildings in the same organization, in order to better be able to answer if the contrasts in what works and does not work vary – in response – primarily because of differing perceptual lenses held by various stakeholders, or more so if they represent clear and established differences between specific work settings and leadership styles incumbent in them.
- Explore the differences between settings that have already more so embraced distributed leadership approaches, and perhaps thereby have some existing capacity for investment it



takes to pursue a sustainability path, and other settings that more compliantly have a “do as you are told culture.

- Explore the potential involvement with and ramifications from addressing sustainability from more of a policy and or mission standpoint. It was noted in this study that the lack of investment from the Superintendent of Schools was viewed by some as having a limiting effect on potential positive outcomes. Saying it once again, sustainability is not easy. One author got the term sustainability inserted into the mission statement in a different former work setting – only to see it disappear as soon as he moved on to a new job. It may be the right path to take, but does everyone want to go that route? What happens when the message comes from the top? Does it take on a feeling of dominance or one more so of encouragement and nurturance?

Honest questions like these, that come out of an investigation intended to open doors for future inquiry, deserve to be answered. Leadership is not easy. Attempt to make it so – is not credible leadership. Popular or not, well represented in the literature anymore or not, the issues addressed in this study and the possibilities uncovered within confirm there is genuine need for the approaches explored herein.

## Conclusions

This case study was an exploratory venture that provided important information to the cooperating district, helped generate practical insights for daily practice, and will also lead to important considerations for future study. As the title of the article denotes, very personal feelings of purpose and efficacy clearly impacted and even guided the actions of various stakeholders in the school improvement initiative examined here. There was visible need for the district to respond to challenges connected with its failing performance rating. The district was ready to partner with others to address failing performance, but that does not mean the staff in the district was ready to embrace the ensuing changes or the manner in which they were being introduced. Critical lessons learned from this case study include:

**Actual findings differ from anticipated findings.** Upon concluding this study, the researcher was inspired by the findings, which were significantly different than those that were initially anticipated. As a participant in the RPI himself, the researcher expected study participants to express perceptions similar to his own. By examining the perceptions of multiple participants who held a variety of roles in the RPI, the researcher was able to identify a broader set of goals, a wider range of leaders, and a richer set of attributes to define sustainable leadership than those that the researcher held prior to the study.

**Perception is highly individualized and role-driven.** The realization that the study resulted in new learning for the researcher highlighted the notion that all people perceive their experiences in unique ways that are highly based on their own roles. This is important for all education leaders to recognize. Not all participants in a reform perceive the reform in the same way that the leader does. As a result, leaders need to engage in constant cycles of dialogue with participants, specifically for the purpose of checking perceptions about new initiatives as well as existing, systems, structures and projects.

**Superintendent leadership was notably absent.** The researcher found it notable that the leadership of the superintendent was absent from participants’ perceptions. Only one study participant explicitly perceived the superintendent as playing a key leadership role. This study reveals that for at least the study participants, the role of the superintendent was not perceived as

having a significant leadership influence. This finding underscores the importance of recurring cycles of dialogue among leaders and participants at all levels to check perceptions about the complicated work of reform and to ensure that there is a clear and shared understanding about the goals, roles and evidence of impact being examined during any systematic change process.

**Leadership need not be perfect to make and sustain changes that matter.** This study included educators who did more than simply participate in a reform project that was put into place to change school accountability labels. The educators in this study are also leaders who modeled a personal commitment to children's learning as well as their own. The educators in this study also modeled the tenacity, perseverance, commitment and hope that are the cornerstones of true sustainability. This is in keeping with the attributes of sustainable leadership that Hargreaves and Fink (2004) offered,

Leaders develop sustainability by committing to and protecting deep learning in their schools; by trying to ensure that improvements last over time, especially after they have gone; by distributing leadership to and responsibility to others; by considering the impact of their leadership on the schools and communities around them; by sustaining themselves so that they can persist with their vision and avoid burning out; by promoting and perpetuating diverse approaches to reform rather than standardized prescriptions of teacher and learning and by actively engaging with their environments (p.13).

Ultimately, the researcher concluded that true reform sustainability requires sustainable leadership practices to ensure that those implementing the reforms are able to develop the sense of purpose, commitment and efficacy necessary for the reforms to thrive in a healthy, professional and productive environment that supports continued implementation of those elements.

The educators in this study are, each in their own way, practitioners of sustainable leadership. These leaders were able to achieve goals that mattered through the development and implementation of changes that mattered during the RPI. Though they did not implement every strategy perfectly, and though they did not achieve every academic goal, they sustained. As a result, the children, and community of the Central Elementary School District are better educated and better prepared to succeed because of the work of these leaders and their commitment to making and sustaining changes that matter.

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