

SUMMARY

Successful education reformers develop practical strategies to manage change in a systematic way. School reform can be a complex undertaking that requires careful thought and administration, and nearly all reforms, regardless of their scope or intended target, share a number of characteristics. This report reviews the essential elements of planning, implementing, and sustaining school reform. It is designed to assist policymakers and practitioners at the district, school, and community levels in creating strategies that will enable them to increase student learning.

While many factors affect a reform's likelihood of success or failure, this report presents eight key lessons to guide prospective reformers. These lessons are drawn from 12 major studies of education reform funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). Taken together, these lessons emphasize a comprehensive, strategic, and common-sense approach to school reform—one too often overlooked as reforms are rushed from design to implementation. While the lessons are not arranged in any particular order, they do identify a cluster of concerns that relate to the reform process. Planning guides and worksheets, provided in Appendix A, can assist motivated readers in formulating and structuring their initial reform efforts. In summary, the eight key lessons are the following:

Planning Reform Efforts

- 1) Leadership: Strong leadership enhances the prospect of successful reform.
- 2) Goals: Reform goals should be based on a shared vision and have the active support of a wide range of stakeholders who participate in achieving them.
- 3) Timing: School reform takes time and involves risk.

Implementing Proposed Reforms

- 4) Training: Participants must have training before they implement reform.
- 5) Flexibility: Reform strategies should be flexible to accommodate multiple solutions to a given problem.
- 6) Infrastructure: Reform may require redesigning organizational infrastructure.

Sustaining Ongoing Reforms

- 7) **Managing Resources:** Reform prospects improve if there is a means to redirect or reallocate resources in ways that meet the needs of the new, emerging system. Reform is not cost-free.
- 8) **Self-Assessment:** Reform is an ongoing process.

Those developing a reform proposal, as well as those engaged in ongoing projects, are encouraged to use these lessons and planning guides to structure their activities. Although this report is intended to describe the important elements that underlie all successful reform efforts, readers are cautioned not to treat lessons as discrete elements that may be adopted in a piecemeal fashion. Each lesson described is a piece of a larger puzzle that is called reform—and the successful reformer ensures that all the pieces are there before beginning assembly.

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