

Features

Change Management

Dana Godek and Michael Moore

Piloting progress

Leaders must create a culture of continuous improvement where people feel invested, motivated and equipped to adapt to new initiatives.

While change seems constant in education, implementing it effectively is one of the greatest challenges for district and team leaders. From addressing achievement gaps to unfunded mandates, superintendents and their teams are expected to manage complex initiatives that face ingrained practices, misaligned structures and systems, conflicting interests and cultural resistance.

Too often, the root cause of failed initiatives lies in under-planning and overconfidence. This article provides a comprehensive approach to managing change, offering research-based strategies and actionable insights to help lead through the arc of change.

“The Change Arc” is a pattern of mindset transition where initial negative perceptions of change (difficult, costly, weird) shift toward acceptance (easy, rewarding, normal) and leaders play a critical role in facilitating this transition (Anderson, 2022).

Intentional and sustained change management is essential. Successful change is more than just completing tasks on a project management plan—it requires creating a culture of continuous improvement where people feel invested, motivated and equipped to adapt to future initiatives.

Why, what and how?

Every effective change initiative starts with increasing understanding and clarifying priorities. Leaders play a critical role in facilitating this transition and tying it back to the organization’s strategic plan. Increasing understanding is foundational to the development of a strong project plan, as it ensures all stakeholders are aligned on the project’s purpose, goals and implementation strategies.

By clarifying the “why,” “what” and “how” of a project, leaders can reduce resistance, foster collaboration and build trust among team members. This shared understanding allows for more accurate identification of needs, prioritization of resources and alignment of efforts, resulting in a project plan that is both actionable and adaptable to challenges.



Integrating this clarity into planning supports sustainable progress and successful outcomes.

1. Assessing readiness and stakeholder engagement: First, conduct a thorough assessment. This includes evaluating the system’s capacity for taking on another initiative, available resources and the organizational factors that will help or hinder the project. Key strategies include root cause analysis, leveraging driving forces and mitigating restraining forces.

It provides a reflective and iterative approach to ensure projects achieve desired outcomes and remain adaptable to changes (Region 14 Comprehensive Center). This simple readiness assessment provides critical insights into potential roadblocks and highlights areas that will need additional attention and support.

Next, identify key groups affected by the change and engage them early. Consider upfront how their interests and values will be impacted and what a “win” would look like for them.

Authentic engagement activities increase the likelihood that stakeholders believe their perspectives and needs are valued. Share the information you get from these activities broadly so that as many perspectives as possible are explicitly addressed as the project advances. Engagement is not a one-time event; it is a process of collaboration and trust-building.

2. *Understanding stakeholder perspectives:* Rick Maurer's approach to change management focuses on understanding and addressing resistance by addressing three critical factors that determine whether people will embrace or resist change:

- **"I don't get it":** This resistance stems from a lack of understanding about the change. People may not see the need for it, fail to grasp the strategy or feel left out of key communications.

- **"I don't like it":** At this level, resistance arises from emotional reactions. People may fear losing something important, feel uncomfortable with uncertainty or wonder what's in it for them.

- **"I don't trust you":** This is the deepest level of resistance, where people oppose the change due to a lack of trust in the leaders or the organization itself. This distrust often stems from previous experiences or perceived hidden agendas (Maurer, 2010).

3. *Crafting a communication plan:* Effective, sustained and clear communication is the backbone of any change effort. It's not just about disseminating information but creating meaningful dialogue with all stakeholders. Leaders should focus on three key audiences:



- **Internal stakeholders:** Teachers, staff and administrators need to understand the vision, rationale and timeline. Use staff meetings, newsletters and dedicated Q&A sessions to build clarity and receive feedback.

- **Community members:** Parents and local leaders are often the first to ask, "How will this affect us?" Regular updates through town halls, social media and district websites can

bridge gaps.

- **School board:** Keep board members informed at every stage. Provide them with data, anticipated challenges and progress updates to ensure alignment. Understandably, board members want to avoid being surprised by a question at the grocery store. Anticipate their needs and provide information with enough detail so that they can provide effective constituent service.

Clarity and consistency are essential criteria for effective communication, but access and transparency are equally important. Stakeholders should be able to find as much information about the initiative as possible—especially the progress being made—easily and virtually. When this information is not readily available, it is easy for those who resist the change to spread misinformation.

4. Building momentum as soon as possible: Momentum is crucial to successful change management because it creates the energy and commitment needed to sustain progress and overcome obstacles. As Kotter highlights in his eight-step model, generating short-term wins early in the process builds credibility and enthusiasm for the change effort.

These wins demonstrate that the change is working, motivating stakeholders to continue investing their effort and focus. Momentum not only maintains engagement but also builds a self-reinforcing cycle: as people see results, they are more likely to support and drive further change.

Without momentum, even the best-planned initiatives risk losing steam, leaving stakeholders disengaged and resistant to future efforts. Leaders work through a guiding coalition, which involves assembling a group of influential, capable and committed individuals who can lead and drive change effectively within an organization (Kotter, 1996).

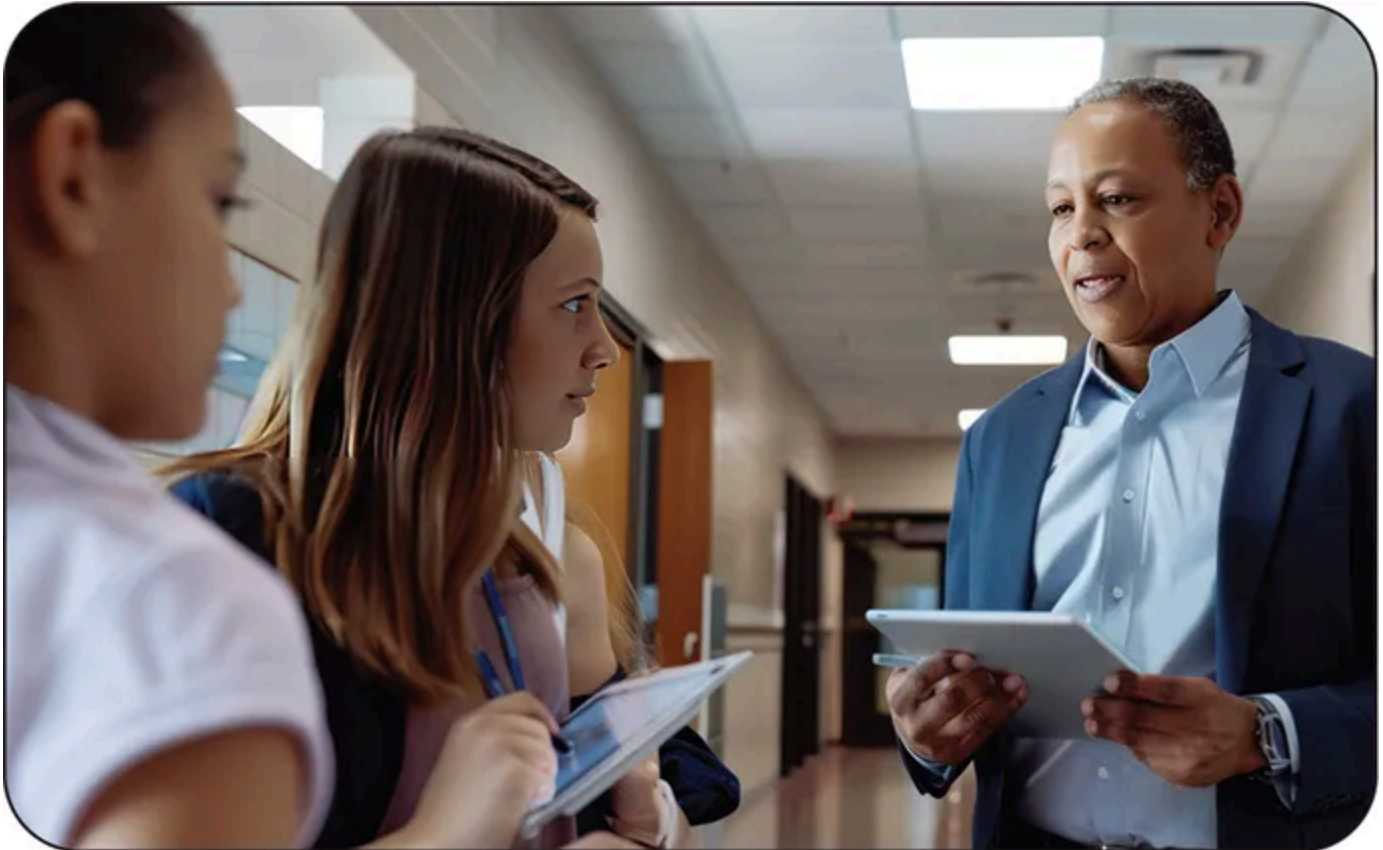
Execution vs. implementation

Executing a plan differs from implementing a change initiative. Execution focuses on completing tasks outlined in the plan, while implementation involves embedding these changes into daily practice, making them part of the organization's DNA.

1. Prototyping, not piloting: District leaders often rely on pilot programs to test changes. But pilots can signal uncertainty and invite resistance. Instead, adopt a prototyping mindset. Design small-scale versions of the initiative, test them in controlled settings and refine based on real-world feedback. Prototypes demonstrate a commitment to change while offering flexibility for adjustments.

2. Engaging change agents: Change agents— principals, teacher leaders and other influencers—are critical in driving initiatives forward. They should be involved in two ways:

- **Informing the process:** Engage change agents during the design phase to ensure the initiative aligns with on-the-ground realities. Their insights can prevent blind spots and refine strategies.
- **Visible support:** Empower these leaders to champion change publicly. When staff see respected colleagues advocating for an initiative, it builds credibility and fosters buy-in.



3. Providing training and support: No change initiative succeeds without equipping people for success. Tailored professional development, ongoing coaching and accessible resources ensure that stakeholders feel prepared and supported. Training should go beyond the mechanics of new practices to address the “why” behind the change. All successful change efforts require intentional investment—of time, training and practice—in people.

4. Creating psychological safety: Encourage a culture where employees feel safe sharing concerns, asking questions and experimenting with new approaches. Psychological safety fosters innovation and ensures that challenges are addressed constructively.

How to stay the course—and refine it

Ongoing progress monitoring and feedback evaluation are critical to ensuring alignment and effectiveness once an initiative is underway.

1. Defining metrics and KPIs: Metrics and key performance indicators should be defined during the planning phase to serve as a roadmap for measuring success. Clear metrics allow stakeholders to track progress and maintain momentum.

In the *Four Disciplines of Execution* framework, a key distinction is made between leading indicators and lagging indicators. Lagging indicators measure the outcome you want to achieve. By the time they show whether you succeeded (e.g., test scores, graduation rates,) there is nothing you can do about it.

In contrast, leading indicators are predictive and controllable; they measure the behaviors or actions that drive the desired outcomes (e.g., the frequency of tutoring sessions, office referrals). By focusing on leading indicators, teams can direct their efforts toward high-impact activities that significantly improve the likelihood of achieving lagging goals.

2. Monitoring progress: Regular feedback loops are critical. Use surveys, focus groups and one-on-one conversations to assess how the initiative is perceived and where mid-course corrections are needed. Leadership should remain actively engaged, conducting site visits and holding regular check-ins to maintain visibility, address concerns and celebrate successes.

3. Adapting vs. flexibility: Adapting means making strategic adjustments based on data and feedback, while flexibility refers to maintaining openness to new ideas or unforeseen challenges. Both are essential for navigating the complexities of change, but adaptation ensures intentionality and alignment with goals.

4. The Impact of failed change: Failed or tentative efforts create a culture of skepticism. When staff see initiatives fizzle out, they may adopt a “wait-it-out” mindset, assuming the change will pass. Conversely, highly visible, successful initiatives energize teams, increase efficacy and build a culture of continuous improvement.

Making change stick

The ultimate goal of any change initiative is to embed it into the district’s culture and systems, ensuring lasting impact.

1. Institutionalizing change: Surprisingly, planning for institutionalization should begin at the initiative’s inception. Embedding new practices into organizational norms, policies and procedures ensures sustainability. New practices must become part of organizational norms, policies and procedures.

According to Kurt Lewin’s ‘force field analysis’ approach, change happens when the driving forces pushing for change outweigh the resisting forces holding things back (Lewin, 1951). While it might seem logical to focus on increasing the driving forces—like motivation, incentives or urgency—Lewin suggests that it’s often more effective to reduce the power

of the resisting forces. These obstacles, such as fear, confusion or lack of resources, create friction that slows progress.

2. Celebrating success: Recognize and celebrate milestones to sustain momentum. Celebrations don't need to be elaborate—acknowledging progress in meetings, newsletters or social media reinforces commitment and builds pride.

3. Encouraging continuous learning: Foster a culture of reflection and learning. Conduct after-action reviews to evaluate the initiative's outcomes, identify lessons learned, and improve future efforts.

Citations

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Q&A

From Classroom to Career: Strengthening K-12 Pathways to Higher Education and Today's Workforce

With districts and schools striving to balance college and career readiness, what strategies are most effective in preparing students for higher ed and today's workforce?

Balancing college and career readiness isn't just about what students learn—it's about how they learn. A 2023 College Board study reinforces that a rigorous high school curriculum is key to college success, but as the workforce rapidly evolves, students also need to develop the ability to learn, adapt, and apply knowledge in new ways.

Research from Pearson highlights that today's workforce is underprepared for the speed at which technology is advancing, making 'learning to learn' strategies more critical than ever. By combining advanced coursework with real-world applications and fostering adaptability, schools can ensure students aren't just prepared for their first job or degree, but for a lifetime of learning and growth.

What role can AP® courses play in improving college and career readiness initiatives? Should leadership consider reevaluating advanced courses? If so, how?

AP® courses are a critical piece of the puzzle—they prepare students for the challenges of college while giving them a head start on earning credit. The Class of 2023 results from the College Board show how impactful AP® participation is in boosting students' college and career outcomes.

Expanding access to these courses, particularly through flexible options like virtual delivery, can make a significant difference for students in underserved areas. Reevaluating advanced coursework should include a focus on ensuring it remains rigorous, accessible, and aligned with the skills that students need for the future.

What can schools do to introduce career exploration earlier in students' educational journeys, starting as early as middle school—and how is Pearson supporting these efforts?

Middle school is such an important time to help students discover their interests and strengths. Research shows that early career exploration builds confidence and helps students make more informed decisions later.

We've created **a next-gen career explorer** tool to guide students through age-appropriate pathways that connect their interests with real-world opportunities. By starting these conversations earlier, schools can help students feel empowered to take charge of their futures.

Tom ap Simon

President, Higher Education and Virtual Learning

Pearson



Tom ap Simon is the President of Pearson's Higher Education and Virtual Learning divisions.

Tom joined Pearson in 2004. He worked in Pearson's M&A group for five years, and in finance roles for seven years, including as CFO of Pearson's emerging markets businesses. In 2018 Tom moved into a general management role, leading Pearson's Virtual Schools division through the pandemic, where he oversaw significant growth in student enrollment, and improvement in academic outcomes and retention. Tom was named

President of Pearson's Higher Education division in 2022 and oversees Pearson's portfolio of college and career readiness learning experiences.

Tom has a masters degree in Economics and Politics from the University of Edinburgh.

What are the biggest challenges for schools in underserved or rural areas when it comes to providing high-quality education?

One of the biggest challenges for rural schools is access—especially when it comes to advanced courses. Nearly 20% of U.S. students attend rural schools, but many don't have options for advanced coursework because of geographic or financial limitations, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

That's why we've created **virtual dual enrollment programs** with a network of partner universities. These programs let students take rigorous courses and earn college credit online, no matter where they live. It's about making sure every student has the same opportunities to succeed.

With the rise of new industries and career clusters in fields like technology and renewable energy, how can schools ensure their CTE programs stay relevant—and how is Pearson helping them keep up?

CTE programs have to keep up with the pace of change in the workforce, especially in high-growth areas like technology and healthcare. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that jobs for software developers and cybersecurity analysts will grow by 25% and 35%, respectively, by 2033, while healthcare roles like medical and health services managers are expected to grow by 28%.

We've partnered with industry leaders to develop CTE content that reflects the skills needed for these kinds of careers. We've also built programs that focus on critical, transferable skills like problem-solving and adaptability, so students are ready not just for their first job, but for a lifetime of learning and growth in a constantly evolving world.

What do districts and schools need to prioritize to make dual enrollment programs more accessible and impactful for students—and how does Pearson support them in expanding these opportunities?

Dual-enrollment programs can be a real game-changer—they let students earn college credit while they're still in high school, giving them a huge head start. A 2024 report by the Community College Research Center found that students in dual-enrollment programs are more likely to enroll in college and finish their degrees compared to their peers.

The challenge is that access to these programs isn't always equal, especially in rural or underserved areas. That's why we're focused on making it easier for districts to offer these opportunities to every student, no matter where they live. It's all about giving students the confidence and skills to succeed.

With so many career options and pathways available, how can schools help students explore and pursue the right opportunities for their future—and how does Pearson provide the tools to make that happen?

Helping students figure out their future starts with making career exploration fun, engaging, and easy to understand. That's why we created **a new career exploration tool**—it helps students connect their interests and strengths to real-world career paths in a way that feels personal and interactive. It's about showing them what's possible and helping them plan their next steps with confidence.

By partnering with schools, we're making sure every student has the tools and guidance they need to make informed choices about their future.

As technology and workforce demands evolve, what trends should schools and districts focus on to prepare students for the future—and how is Pearson helping educators stay ahead?

The future is moving fast, and schools have an incredible chance to prepare students for what's ahead. A 2021 McKinsey & Company report highlights the importance of digital fluency, emotional intelligence, and adaptability—skills that are essential for the workforce of tomorrow. In a world where technology disruption will continue at rapid speed, outpacing human learning,

Pearson's latest "Lost in Transition" report found that "learning to learn" will be necessary to better prepare students for mastering new skills much more quickly.

At Pearson, we're integrating AI, gamification, and personalized learning into our tools to make education more engaging and responsive to students' needs, setting them up for a successful future. For example, our AI-driven platforms adapt to each learner, helping them build those critical skills. And we're not forgetting educators—professional

development is a big part of what we're doing to support classrooms that are ready for the future.

Learn more about Pearson's college and career readiness programs at [Pearson.com/CCR](https://www.pearson.com/CCR)



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