

Fact-File 33: Laying Foundations for School Renewal... 7 arenas for action



Extract from our planning guide on 7 Foundations for School Renewal

School Change – reform or renewal?

School renewal is not a singular thing, nor is it a standard program, project, mechanical formula or prescriptive set of steps to follow. Fundamentally, renewal is about change. While the term's often applied to any program of reform, there are intrinsic differences between real school renewal and conventional reform in terms of:

- ❑ *Impetus:* With renewal it comes from within, while reform tends to be externally imposed.
- ❑ *Control:* With renewal, ownership is in-school and bottom-up. Reform tends to be top-down, directive, prescriptive and often regulatory.
- ❑ *Process:* Renewal is emergent – it evolves over time. Reform tends to be programmatic with predetermined outcomes, steps and solutions.
- ❑ *Focus:* Reform fixes practices, programs or structures that aren't working. Renewal is about deep, whole-school cultural change.
- ❑ *Values:* Reform outcomes conform to current values and models of schooling. Renewal is aspirational. It questions prevailing models and encourages fundamental rethinks.
- ❑ *Participation:* Renewal assumes sustainable change engages everyone in the school. Reform tends to be principal-centred and limits meaningful participation of other levels.

7 Foundations for School Renewal

Whether the focus of renewal is on whole-school culture change, revitalising pedagogical practice creating more open classrooms or taking a more student-centred approach to learning, it's still about building on the solid foundations of a sound change management process.

The diagram on this page depicts 7 foundations that apply to many renewal efforts. These foundations are not linear steps to follow one after the other. Think of them as pillars that all equally bear the weight of your renewal effort.

- ❑ Like foundations, you need to put all of them in place. Often, you may move from one to the other, working on them simultaneously.
- ❑ As a tool to plan a renewal process, they are broad phases. Each school has to identify its own particular pathways and develop its own strategies and action-steps for each phase.



The foundations are designed to help people to work on what we call 'deep school renewal' – evolving a process that can be sustainable, self-regenerating and penetrate below superficial aspects like codes, rules, educational reform policies and mission statements.

Foundation 1: Cultivating Concepts

Renewal almost invariably starts with principals articulating guiding concepts – a new vision of what a school community can aspire to be like. In almost all cases, these concepts are whole-of-school, challenge current paradigms and tend to focus on three broad pathways:

- ❑ Renewing learning practices and pedagogy
- ❑ Putting students at the centre of school-life
- ❑ Engendering broad participation in renewal

Cultivating concepts around things like teaching-learning practice, school culture, curriculum creativity, student-focus and so on, sparks initial conversation and reflection. It also forms a basis for vision and what renewal pathways to explore.

As well as aspirational principles and specific pedagogical concepts, renewal should also cover *design principles*. These are concerned with the renewal process itself – how you introduce it and the approach you plan to take – and inform the design and conduct of the process. For example:

- ❑ *Emergent:* Renewal is not an event but an ongoing process people add to as it evolves.
- ❑ *Participation:* Planning for involvement and empowering others to run renewal processes.
- ❑ *Team-based:* Tasking teams to develop the process and execute various strategies.

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- ❑ *Multi-level use*: Designing a renewal process that can work at various school levels.
- ❑ *Self-regenerating*: Creating a cyclical process that can run repeatedly building on iterations.

Foundation 2: Renewing Leadership

School renewal is closely coupled to the calibre of leaders who cultivate it. But the nature of renewal-style leadership requires leaders to first renew their personal leadership approach.

To make headway with school renewal, leaders need to be powerful and persistent, with a good portion of patience and perseverance thrown in. It calls for a leadership approach distinctly different from conventional principal-leadership, where staff can often depend too much on the classic strong principal to direct and guide.

Renewal principles like participation and self-sufficiency, means replacing principal-centred leadership with a style that empowers a broad base of people. If it is to take root and spread, leaders need to ensure renewal doesn't remain the sole province of only the top admin team. The attributes and capabilities of successful renewal leadership cover things like:

- ❑ Proactive, student-centred attitude to change and willingness to question the status quo.
- ❑ Ability to take a facilitative, change-agent role.
- ❑ A style that is dialogical not directive – able to embrace a plurality of possibilities and handle the ambiguities and complexities of renewal.
- ❑ Skills to engage others in powerful change, conversations, take a collaborative approach and forge commitment to a shared vision.

While principals act as initial drivers and need to stay visibly connected to the process, renewal also calls on them to have the humility to step-aside and let others jointly lead. This spreads the load, stems dependency and builds commitment and capability to sustain renewal.

Foundation 3: Designing a Framework

Renewal is an evolving process but developing a process plan early that formulates approaches, support frameworks and potential strategies and actions provides structure, focus and momentum.

School renewal can't be accomplished through the efforts of a handful of individuals or be the

province solely of the senior leadership team. It needs a collective effort and identifying a group of renewal champions to drive it is key. Once you have them on board, renewal needs a framework for them to operate within. The next diagram shows key groups that can be set up to drive renewal.

❖ The school's *Senior Leadership Team* still needs to be a driving force, to develop shared directions, provide overall guidance, facilitate take-up of directions and sponsor various renewal initiatives.

❖ A *Renewal Steering Group* is set up initially to design the renewal process in detail. This group takes day-to-day responsibility for things like:

- ❑ Refining renewal principles and guidelines
- ❑ Engaging people in renewal conversations
- ❑ Awareness-raising/vision workshops
- ❑ Coordinating renewal activities/groups
- ❑ Monitoring the process and progress

School Renewal Action Framework...



❖ *Renewal Facilitators* may come from the ranks of the steering group, senior team or others who support renewal. They volunteer to facilitate parts of the process such as shared vision and awareness sessions or various team meetings.

❖ *Learning Teams* are the main mechanism, at least in the early stages of a renewal process, and may be adopted as a more permanent strategy. They consist of anything from 3 to usually no more than 5 people, who elect to work on a particular renewal pathway, develop concepts, test them out and help to implement. Composition varies with the issue being looked at but generally there are three types:

- ❑ *Cross-School*: people from different parts of the school who investigate issues that have whole-of-school focus/ramifications

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- ❑ *Common Interest*: brings together those who have an interest or passion in a particular renewal or improvement pathway
- ❑ *Department/Subject*: people from the same department/subject area looking into an issue that affects only their immediate area.

Members of Learning Teams are occasional, not long-term. They form to work on specific renewal aspects and disband when the work is complete.

Foundation 4: Shaping a Shared Vision

Shared Vision marks the startpoint for renewal. When a school community collectively creates a shared vision, it provides common focus, a sense of commitment and mutual purpose.

The process involves reflecting on questions like: What is the purpose of our school? What guiding principles, values and ultimate outcomes do we want for students? What are the major themes or pathways to follow for school renewal?

Shared vision often starts with the principal or senior leadership team having a vision first, but designing a whole-school process where people come together to share aspirations around what school renewal means and discuss approaches, actions and strategies, is essential to buy-in and ownership. A good shared-visioning process:

- ❑ Involves large numbers of people in a series of dialogue and discussion sessions. Time-consuming – but if you want a truly shared vision there's few other ways than to get lots of people sharing ideas for the future.
- ❑ Needs new guiding concepts to dislodge old mental models and set clear challenges and change goals that matter to people.
- ❑ Aims to identify the most important themes or renewal pathways to build visions around.
- ❑ Embraces everything – policies, practices, learning content and the ways in which these are learned and taught.
- ❑ Translates visions and beliefs into tangible learning principles and teaching practice.

Foundation 5: Facilitating Collaboration

Renewal is a collaborative effort – it's essentially a *think one-school* process based on breaking down learning silos, cross-boundary conversation

and managing to focus everyone on what matters most for students, learning and school-life.

Like any change process, before collective action and collaborative dialogue can take place, there's a need for leaders to build relationships. Creating a one-school climate for renewal won't happen by principal-proclamation though. It calls on leaders to act as change agents to:

- ❑ Facilitate collaboration across borders
- ❑ Set up cross-school team structures
- ❑ Take actions to strengthen relationships
- ❑ Confront anti-collaborative behaviours

This foundation is about the people side of school renewal. It covers creating actions to facilitate people to think one-school. For example:

- ❑ *Educate*: What capacities, skills and tools do people need to engage with renewal?
- ❑ *Engage*: Working on an array of strategies to keep people connected with the process.
- ❑ *Energise*: Inspiring people to 'hang in there' through the ups and downs of renewal and challenge them to move out of comfort zones.
- ❑ *Involve*: Thinking of how to involve as many people as you can to help with renewal.

Foundation 6: Creating the Culture

Culture is at the core of renewal. Any school embarking on it has to confront recreating the culture to support and sustain the process. In fact, many efforts start with a realisation that culture requires major renovation – for example:

- ❑ Correcting negative values such as schools revolving around staff not students.
- ❑ Toxic classroom climates or dysfunctional interactions and problematic behaviours.
- ❑ Poor staff/student morale, learning silos or entrenched individualism.
- ❑ Lack of a common sense of learning purpose.
- ❑ Reluctance, indifference or resistance to engaging in school renewal efforts.
- ❑ Old ways of thinking or doing like traditional teacher-directed strategies.

Real renewal rests on new behaviours and new ways of thinking. Culture contributes in a big way to this. While hard-to-shift, many behavioural, attitudinal and relational problems stem from culture and obstruct renewal efforts. So working

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on culture isn't optional. This means taking tangible steps to recreate culture through:

- ❑ Conducting dialogues and culture-awareness sessions to look at how people interact and become more self-aware of behaviour that contributes to positive school cultures.
- ❑ Getting a clearer picture of what the culture needs to look like and identifying elements that support renewal and those that don't.
- ❑ Scanning to gather opinions on the state of the current culture and assess differences between actual and desired characteristics.
- ❑ Providing culture-building clinics to provide people with new conversational, emotional and positive interaction skills to help change behaviours and build more positive climates.
- ❑ Increasing degrees of teamwork/collaboration and breaking-down systemic/cultural barriers like privatised classrooms and silo structures.

Foundation 7: Revitalising Learning

The ultimate aim of school renewal is to create a better, more enriching experience of learning and being in classrooms for students, teachers, parent, administrators and community. This is the doing bit of renewal work – where you start making and sustaining changes. It means:

- ❑ Translating renewal concepts into classroom practices, new learning approaches and new ways of thinking and behaving.
- ❑ Planning and equipping people to take action, implement changes and monitoring change progress and take-up.
- ❑ Identifying strategies to embed and sustain renewable change, capturing the learning, modifying the renewal process and embarking on new rounds of renewal activity.

The outcomes of renewal vary of course, but renewal milestones you might see include:

- ☑ A shared vision – and a will to translate it into tangible learning principles and teaching practices with commitments to take action
- ☑ Schools building their own internal capacity to change and relying less on centrally imposed programs of school reform.
- ☑ Systems emerging to capture learning, share information and learn from experience – including sharing learning with other schools.
- ☑ A true team-based learning culture featuring collaborative conversations and dialogue both in staff-room and classroom.
- ☑ Learner-centred not teacher-centric learning.
- ☑ Helping students expand their learning agility through thinking and emotional literacy, 'making connections' and seeing systemic relationships between things rather than discrete subject areas.
- ☑ Staff experimenting with new forms of learning, communicating in open ways and actively sharing to improve their work.
- ☑ Adopting classroom management processes that are collaborative and inclusive and making schools a safe, inclusive environment where children and adults learn together.
- ☑ Staff seeing their role as teacher-leaders, involved in all aspects of school running with a readiness and capability to continue to undertake systemic whole school renewal

The ultimate determiner of lasting change is whether people are behaving, thinking and doing differently – whether the new ways get distributed widely enough through the school to create a sufficiently critical mass to sustain the change.

Schools need to constantly re-invent and revitalise themselves to keep relevant, "not through regulation" as Peter Senge reminds us in *Schools that Learn*, but rather through "changing the way we think and interact together." This is the supreme goal of school renewal. ■

The Change Forum conducts a range of change, learning and culture-building programs publicly and in-house, tailored to your school context or leadership learning needs. For more on our approach and ways we can help, download our *Change Services Profile* or *Culture Change Services Prospectus* at www.thechangeforum.com or call ☎ **07-4068 7591** or ✉ consult@thechangeforum.com



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