

Messages from reforming teachers for those who want school reform —

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This chapter gives an overview of some of the dominant, largely shared messages from the interviews with teachers who have been actively engaged in the New Basics Trial. The text is a set of messages from the teachers to the many people who seek to reform schools—politicians, government policy makers, academics, principals, consultants and others. The words of reforming teachers illustrate the points being made.

Message #1: Schools and teachers have a history of attempting to reform aspects of their policy and practice. This influences—and often distorts—how they view proposed reform initiatives.

No reform is free from past influences and experiences. These pose a number of difficulties for reformers, not least in getting the message through the lingering “noise” of earlier attempts at reform. Previous experience predisposes staff to assess any educational reform through lenses which colour or distort key messages. These lenses are often shaped by the way the reform was embarked upon initially. Many staff are sceptical, if not cynical, about a large system’s capacity and willingness to stay the distance with a specific reform without undermining or under-resourcing it.

In the New Basics Trial, some teachers were unhappy that basic messages or underlying philosophical features of the reform were not sufficiently understood by teachers, or promulgated by leaders.

I think we should have spent more time in either learning team staff meetings or block meetings investigating that initial document [*New Basics: Theory into Practice* (Education Queensland, 2000a)] so that we all had at least a knowledge, if not an understanding, of the original reason why it was created.

— **Detta Lange**, Eagleby State School

The research basis of a reform should be clearly expressed and available to teachers who will have the responsibility for implementing it. As well, teachers need to be able to project themselves and the system to the desired end-points of the reform to feel comfortable about embarking on the journey. The destination, likely stopping points, places of interest, and resources required, are all legitimate questions that need reasonable answers from those attempting to persuade reforming teachers of the benefits of being involved. This is very much a sensitive issue for leadership at school and within the larger system. The mantra of “Trust me, I’m an administrator” doesn’t travel very far in school staffrooms.

In the specific case of New Basics, the *New Basics Project Technical Paper* (Education Queensland, 2000b) and subsequent guide documents appeared to absolve most administrators from the hard work of expressing the essence of the reform for teachers they wished to “reform” in some way. Whether the enormity of the enterprise embarked upon was clear to reforming teachers is perhaps another issue.

The [New Basics] Trial is way too minimalist. A three-year trial is ridiculous. A project like this needs a fifteen year longitudinal study, and there needs to be a commitment to span at least a decade to trace children.

— **Anne Stephens**, Kelvin Grove State College

Teachers understand that a “trial” has many meanings, including the possibility of public scrutiny of evidence of progress, and of being “imprisoned” in a reform designed by others. The possibilities of a quantum leap in support for student learning and dynamics of trust among professional equals are usually crucial motivators for reforming teachers to wish to be actively involved.

It is a trial. That comforted a lot of teachers and myself as well. I think a lot of people were a bit worried about moderation: that you were “on trial”; that your teaching was on trial to see if you were teaching well.

— **Mandy Camfferman**, Inglewood P-10 State School

Message #2: There are usually several reasons why a school “decides” to embark on a particular reform, including the beliefs (and often ambitions) of principals, other key administrators and senior teachers.

Often the early motivations and decisions of key players at the school exert continuing influence over the particular response to the reform emphasised or legitimated at the school site. In addition, it is often difficult for such key players to audit the school’s capacity to successfully engage with the reform, or to assess the competencies of staff to implement its key features in advance of beginning the reform process. In some cases, the course of the reform, and experiences of teachers desiring reform at a school, can be effectively thwarted by instability and turnover of school administrators. For New Basics trial schools, a key reformer or group of teachers linked to the school administration needs to step into the breach in this instance and provide the necessary continuity and stability for teachers.

This year is the first year over the past five that we’ve had a full admin. team where there is not someone in an acting position. So it has been a very unsettled period. That was one of the reasons that I took on the Curriculum Coordinator’s role. When the acting Deputy’s role was filled by a permanent Deputy, there was some concern shown that this was going to be another change to the leadership of this team. What if this person wasn’t committed to that trial? So I said, I’ll continue to lead that trial.

— Ray Pembleton, Nambour State High School

How school leaders inform teachers of the nature and features of a particular reform, and how staff are able to engage and debate its possibilities for their “patch”, are key variables which influence the early “trajectory” of the reform. In the schools from the New Basics Trial selected for this book, it is apparent that many principals provided the key impetus and support to many reforming teachers:

I had many meetings with Bryan [Hughes], the Principal, saying, “I don’t know how I can do that!” And he said, “But you already are doing that!” He helped me map out the connections in what I was struggling with; just showing me that what I was doing was on the right track; that I wasn’t ten miles that way.

— Virginia Robinson, Maryborough Special School

For other schools, the principal is one, albeit an important, member of the reforming group, but is not looked to to provide all the impetus and support:

I don’t know whether it’s because we’re a small school that we don’t have to look to the principal all the time, to the hierarchy of the structure as such. But certainly the support of the principal is vital—she was there with all our staff meetings and so she was informed with what was going on.

— Kath Harrison, Buranda State School

Message #3: Vision and leadership are needed throughout the reform process, not just in the initiating phase.

Vision is important in initiating a reform, but in the long run—and especially for complex, multi-faceted, whole-school changes—both vision and leadership are important factors for maintaining and sustaining the momentum of effective implementation by teachers. Principals are expected to have (or to develop) a clear vision, but without expressing it in authoritarian, doctrinaire or over-zealous terms. In addition, the essence of the reform initiative should be able to be connected deeply with the overall, pre-existing philosophical base of the school.

It came from our Principal. She said, “This was happening and there was a trial coming up and this is what was going to be involved.” She encouraged us to get involved as a staff. We’re very much into integrated and inquiry-based learning, with culminating activities ...

— Linda Short, Chevallum State School

They need to all have a clear understanding of what their school values are in their initial statement. Does New Basics fit into that as it already exists?

— Anne Stephens, Kelvin Grove State College

Leadership of reform in schools is usually shared (or needs to be nurtured) across several reforming teachers, especially in large schools. Both vision and leadership need to be supportive of all the teachers undergoing change, and responsive to the challenges that inevitably—and often unpredictably—emerge during implementation.

The leadership of the New Basics Trial in this school was basically our Curriculum Committee, which is made up of teachers and HoDs, with input from one Deputy. The day-to-day management of New Basics rests with the librarian and myself.

— Ray Pembleton, Nambour State High School

I also think the leadership, the parallel leadership, is significant. I've been given opportunities I know that none of my peers who went through uni with me have had. I've appreciated being given roles to do around the school leadership-wise, going away and coming back and in-servicing the other staff members.

— Virginia Robinson, Maryborough Special School

Message #4: Teachers really determine the course of educational change in any school: a determinant factor that is often posed in the negative sense as "resistance" to a desired reform.

In most schools there is a quantum of teachers prepared to attempt most reasonably-designed reforms. At the same time, these schools contain teachers at varying levels of knowledge and commitment to a particular change in either policy or practice. "Resistance" and "resistors" are almost axiomatic factors identified in the discourse of the educational reform literature and in the tales of principals and other reforming teachers.

Staff were basically divided in their approach to New Basics when we first embarked on our journey. Comments ranged across a continuum: some said, "It was impossible"; others were prepared to have a go; some people were very excited and wanted to jump straight in; and the odd one transferred.

— Susan Welsh, Maryborough Special School

For change to be interpreted and implemented successfully, there is little doubt that sufficient staff in a school site undergoing reform need to understand and be committed, at a deep level, to the many dimensions of the change. How many is sufficient? In essence, enough staff located throughout the school who can and do provide support to each other as reforming teachers attempt to change practice in line with the reform. In reforming New Basics schools, the sense of easy camaraderie amongst reforming teachers is often palpable and integral to altered practices.

I'd like us to remain innovative and to capture that. I hope people don't get dry and burn out. The working in a team—the team spirit—has been just fantastic. The open classroom policy works so well for some of us. It doesn't work for all, but when you get it right, it's exciting; you don't want to change it. I don't want to go back to just having my own classroom's four walls.

— Anne Stephens, Kelvin Grove State College

These reform attempts involve professional risk-taking and learning, but they also assume some basic knowledge and skills associated with the initiative, such that the competence and confidence of all teachers involved gradually increase over time. All reforms alter and intensify the demands placed on reforming teachers, both as individuals and as a group of professional practitioners, often in ways beyond the scope envisaged by those who initiated the reform at system and school level. If this is not planned for and openly acknowledged—often with adjustments made to timelines and expectations—reforming teachers often feel like the meat in the sandwich, caught between the competing demands of administrators and colleagues with all the attendant confused feelings, loyalties and expectations.

I felt that people's responses were really defined more by system and structures, by the way we organise classes, our timetables, management structures, how we have meetings together, that kind of thing. I felt that had more of an influence on teachers than did necessarily their work in the classroom. I felt that they were the bigger things that were constraining teachers, even if they wanted to do something to change.

— Greg Jordan, Charters Towers State High School

Message #5: Teacher professional learning communities are dynamic but fragile entities, requiring both ongoing direction and support from leaders, and committed energy from all members.

A professional learning community acts like a seed-bed in which growth and development can flourish if sufficient nutrient and support are provided on a continuing basis. It appears to require significant inputs and professional learning opportunities initially before any noticeable impacts appear in classroom practice. It is also affected in unpredictable ways by a myriad of often overlapping and contradictory site-based variables—events, incidents, experiences—that can wash across and dilute the vision and power of the original innovation. Attending to the personal, existential and inter-personal aspects of people undergoing change requires a shared sensitivity and emotional intelligence, with regular nurturing and taking stock.

When you're taking on the New Basics, you will have different people at different levels in the change process. We were pitching too high, we were pitching at the exploration phase, when the work firstly had to go into the initiation, moving from the status quo to initiation. That can take two years.

— Susan Welsh, Maryborough Special School

“Just do it” might work well in an advertising campaign for participation in extreme sports, but won't take you far in a professional learning community of teachers where many members already feel pushed to—or beyond—their limits or capacities. Reforming teachers' approach to a key task, after having given it their best first effort, is almost always different, better and more considered with the passage of time and the benefit of understanding how others approached and coped with the experience.

When we did our school-based moderation, the teachers did a great job. We'd get around the table and look at the work and discuss it with reference to the standards descriptors. We definitely gained insights into what we should be teaching, and how we might improve it.

— Karen Harris, originally at Thursday Island State School, now at Edge Hill State School

Message #6: Effective, flexible and cooperative planning is required across the duration of a reform for its effective implementation.

Engaging most or all staff in planning as equal members of learning teams is a whole-school priority that requires the allocation of significant resources, including teacher release from classes, professional development opportunities, and new learning materials to support altered pedagogies. Such planning ranges from classroom to strategic levels; from ensuring resources for today's challenges to anticipating what are likely to be required to meet more distant future needs.

We paid for a lot of professional development; for more than two years most of the professional development was handed over to New Basics. We did cop some flack over that, some of which was certainly justified. Everything else seemed to go on hold. We've had criticism about this being the first school that teachers had been in where the Grade 8s get priority over the seniors. I guess the team of us involved in implementing New Basics were pro-active—when a student-free day was coming up, we grabbed it with open arms and said, “Right, this is what we'd like to do!”

— Ray Pembleton, Nambour State High School

The consequences of attempting to limit or quarantine the impact of a significant reform to limited parts of a school, or to a specialist team, are almost invariably just that—limited by the pre-set boundaries. The perception of reforming teachers in these circumstances is often that they feel used or manipulated, and dissatisfied with the full possibilities of the reform not being realised because reasonable risks weren't taken by the school as a whole, such that sufficient teachers weren't empowered or trusted to explore and implement the reform.

Belmont and their teachers get two days in the beginning of each term just doing it, putting it together. That's necessary. I think also they need to get teachers who want to be there. As much as possible, people who are working with it need to be volunteers.

— Anne Stephens, Kelvin Grove State College

Message #7: Coordinating changes to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment such that a new, balanced alignment emerges sounds smart in theory, but is unrealistic to expect on a continuing basis in practice.

These elements are continually in dynamic interplay, affecting each other and shifting the concomitant alignments with other structural and organisational practices. Once assessment requirements become clear to all involved, they tend to “wash back” a set of shared expectations into the curriculum—altering both overall expectations for learning and individual teaching plans prepared for achieving them.

I think Rich Task as a concept dominates.

— Anne Stephens, Kelvin Grove State College

Although reforming teachers may wish to develop a shared set of pedagogical practices, and seek experiences that deprivatise their classroom practice, they are often forced ultimately to acknowledge that many other teachers need to reclaim a certain degree of autonomy and discretion in their classroom choices so that they are sufficiently comfortable with the reform. In this way, all teachers involved often come to “domesticate” those elements of the reform that they can most easily relate to their pre-existing paradigm or practices, and avoid or only superficially comply with those aspects that they perceive as “too hard”, or not appropriate to their school or student context.

Teachers said it was a shame to have to stifle the children by not allowing them to follow their interests. I combined the Oral Histories and Celebratory Events Rich Tasks because each teacher chose a different event to celebrate so that we could include some of the things that naturally came up in the calendar for TI—like the dance team going away on tour.

— Karen Harris, originally at Thursday Island State School, now at Edge Hill State School

This effect is most particularly noticeable in larger or more complex school environments. In smaller, simpler settings the level of shared expectations appears to flow more naturally from the need to plan cooperatively to achieve a whole-school reform impact.

We did have teachers saying last year that even with things that the children were interested in we don't always have time to follow up because you have this pressure of fulfilling the Rich Task and moving on. Then we have said “OK, we need to get cleverer about immersing these things within the Rich Task somehow.”

— Kath Harrison, Buranda State School

Message #8: Moderation of standards of student performance can be a useful process that is valued by teachers, so long as it is perceived by them as two-way and interactive.

Moderation provides a public and comparative accountability “steel” that has often been lacking with previous reforms that have fallen by the wayside. However, moderation procedures need to be designed and implemented in a manner that acknowledges and respects what teachers have had to do—both to achieve the student outcomes on display and, simultaneously, to attend to the need to collect appropriate evidence to support their claims for certain levels of student attainment. Reforming teachers learn much from others in the collegial process of focusing on samples of student work; as they become more expert in and comfortable with moderation, they develop a set of norms to guide the behaviour of participants as a group.

Moderation is very useful. Just getting together with other teachers, sharing samples of work, hearing how they are going about things, was very useful; I found it a two-way process. Getting to actually come face to face with teachers from other schools, you then exchanged email addresses and emailed each other about different things. It broadened my network, and I got to know some moderators.

— Kath Harrison, Buranda State School

Once collegial groups of teachers have experience in the power of setting and maintaining standards for learning outcomes, they are unlikely to relinquish it to others with a less direct stake in the results, and they develop stronger expectations for reciprocal sharing of information.

The actual process itself I found hard in that I didn't feel like I got a lot from other people, even though I was giving a lot out. It didn't give me a lot of ideas. For other people I can see the benefits, but it would have been more beneficial had we had more teachers who were doing it. We might get more back. I hope so.

— Virginia Robinson, Maryborough Special School

Message #9: Reforming teachers are bound to be disappointed, frustrated or annoyed when their best efforts are disparaged in public by someone who has specialist knowledge about some outcome elements, but who does not have to implement the whole.

Teachers are particularly sensitive to perceived misalignments between the standards or evidence expected by individual moderators, and they are especially mistrustful of those who make excessive and extravagant demands of teachers based on post-hoc interpretations of the expected standards of student work. Since the teachers are the ones developing and maintaining the learning relationship with students, they are usually not prepared to have their efforts hijacked by those exercising their modicum of power. In such circumstances, reforming teachers may not directly and individually confront those who are perceived to abuse their power; rather, they will often express their feelings indirectly in their networks, or request that principals convey feedback from reforming teachers as a group.

We did get some mixed messages on some of the tasks amongst the moderators. One said this element really could be a pen and paper test, and someone else didn't agree with that. That's a big thing—you design this really beautiful test and then someone doesn't recognise it as being part of the task, and they want to fail the students... I think they need to come out with a common message. I believe the moderators are on a learning curve anyway, because they really need to see children's work before they know.

— Linda Short, Chevallum State School

Message #10: External demands and internal, school-based support are both necessary but insufficient factors driving teachers toward common understanding and interpretation of student learning outcome standards.

Opportunities to network with other teachers, whether as members of a formal cluster or alliance arrangement, are appreciated by teachers as providing continuing support, challenge and inspiration. But many reforming teachers are also aware of the limitations of such local groupings, particularly the tendency towards "group think" on assumed interpretations on key issues. In this situation, reforming teachers also value the "outside-inside" perspectives of some trusted people external to the school acting as critical friends, so long as they have sufficient levels of contact with them over time.

You'd think, "I would have done my curriculum plan differently if I knew then what I know now!" We had a six-month period to do our curriculum plan, whereas everyone else in the District had until the end of the year, and we found it very hard because we didn't know where we were going, or what we were doing. It really helped having Jan Darcy [ex-District Director] as our critical friend. She'd look at our unit plan and she'd say, "So, what are the big questions? What is the deep knowledge?"

— Marni Connolly, Condamine State School

As the reforming teachers in turn learn from and are challenged through their networking with trusted others, their comfort with and commitment to the reform becomes deeper and more central to their altered patterns of practice. In short, they are increasingly able to move easily between insider and outsider perspectives themselves. Often they see the enormity of the expectations and demands placed on them in various roles, but also the extent of limitations placed on their likely effectiveness.

When you are trying to be that teacher leader and things aren't successful, it's difficult to know whether it was me, for example, not doing what I should have been doing; or was it me not being given the opportunity to do what I should have been doing? I think that's the bit I try to balance out. I look at it and I think: "I was a classroom teacher four days a week; I was a literacy coordinator one day a week; but I was also acknowledged by admin. as a critical friend but never given any time to carry out that role." I'm disappointed that I couldn't do more because of the time factor.

— Detta Lange, Eagleby State School

Message #11: Teachers who have experienced first-hand and over time the positive opportunities and impacts generated by a reform are likely to want to see the reform continue and evolve further.

They have usually had to explain to visitors why they do what they do in implementing the reform. They are usually keenly aware of the limitations of the reform—both in its design elements and in the particular interpretation made of it in their school context. They are usually curious to see what others have made of it, how successful they have been and what would make it operate better in their school and in others. Many make individual submissions and recommendations at system and school levels to improve the impact of the reform. Above all, they remain positive about the reform's potential for desired improvements while still keeping their critical faculties engaged about the limits of models of implementation currently on offer.

If they were going to open it up to other schools, I'd love to go into another school knowing what I know now, and do it again, as a principal.

— Marni Connolly, Condamine State School

I still believe in everything that New Basics was founded on. I still think it's excellent. However, the implementation did it a disservice and I think it subverted the intent of the Rich Tasks, the intent of New Basics. I don't know how to solve the problems, but I'd like to find out how to solve them.

— Greg Jordan, Charters Towers State High School

I'd like to see the innovation continue. What it has allowed us to do is think outside the square and become quite innovative in what we do, what we deliver, and the way we deliver it; for example, history through a documentary—it's beautiful.

— Anne Stephens, Kelvin Grove State College

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