

# CHAPTER 1

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## Introducing the Challenges of Change for Teachers

**Y**ou'd think change would be a breeze for teachers. After all, we are immersed in it. No matter what our content areas or grade levels, we become expert at teaching about change—from tadpoles and caterpillars to evolution and revolution; from change across the global economy to change within the heart of a character; about the lightening pace of technological change and the glacial pace of change when it comes to solving problems like poverty and racism.

More to the point, we spend our days enticing and leading, and sometimes coaxing and pleading with, students to change. We work to help them rethink a problem in light of new information; we try to get them to see a situation from a different point of view. We teach them to use a new procedure and to develop more productive work habits. All of the time, we are trying to help them adopt new critical thinking skills and habits of mind. Ultimately, we aim to enlarge their view of the world and their understanding of their roles in it. Our sense of ourselves as effective teachers derives directly from our ability to help students change—to learn and grow.

You'd think teachers would, in fact, be the natural leaders of change. Experts on educational change such as Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves explain that change is, at heart, a learning process; who knows more about learning than teachers? Other educational change researchers describe the ideal change leader as someone who can attend to content and process simultaneously (Havelock & Hamilton, 2004); blending content and process is what teachers do best.

*Moreover, we recognize that we have to change even if all we want to do is keep things as they are* (Waks, 2007). The forces around us are in constant flux, so to maintain the status quo, we must make continual adjustments, just as we do when trying to keep a car on the road in a high wind. And very often, those adjustments are major. Nearly 90% of the teachers

## Experiencing Change

we surveyed<sup>1</sup> said they had experienced a change that had a major positive impact on their lives as teachers, and 70% said those changes occurred at least every three years. They told us about adjusting to change at school, such as teaching a new grade level or content area, adopting new curriculum frameworks or instructional strategies, working with new administrators and colleagues, or moving to a new school. They also told us about how changes in their personal lives affected their performance at school. The good news is that the majority of the teachers we surveyed described these changes as beneficial most of the time, for themselves and for their students.

*Despite the pervasive nature of change, and despite our awareness that it usually works out for the best, most of us find change to be difficult.* It's easy to see why. Even change that appears minor to others doesn't look that way to us because we know that it will cascade. When we make an apparently small change, like adopting a new textbook, we eventually find that we need something new—teaching techniques, teacher-made instructional materials, ways of providing extra support for struggling students. Even more challenging are the changes that matter most to us—the ones we believe will substantially improve student learning. These require an enormous commitment of energy and time, well beyond what schools provide via released time for inservice learning (Guskey, 2002). And then there's the fear factor. If we fail, the cost is high: Students will not learn as well as they would have otherwise. No wonder that we see change as “messy and trying,” something that has us “running through cycles of trial and error, complaining about the difficulty of day-to-day coping, sacrificing other core activities, and feeling frustrated by unsuccessful attempts to make something work” (Adams, 2000, p. 9).

*And yet, time and again, we make good-faith efforts to change,* especially when the change is one for which we volunteer (Richardson, 1998). We don't change things like our approach to curriculum and instruction lightly or for our own sakes. Most of us enjoyed and succeeded in school—that's part of the reason we returned as teachers. But we are willing to change our strategies when we can see that school does not work for all students.

It is a good thing we are willing to make the enormous efforts sometimes needed for change to succeed. When it comes to the hard work of large scale change associated with reform movements, “If a teacher won't do it, it can't be done” (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001, p. 120). Teachers are the conduit of reform, and reform efforts have their intended effect only when teachers are invested in them. As one teacher observed, if a teacher “doesn't believe the change will improve the teaching of children, reform is virtually impossible” (Foley, 1993, p. 12).

Despite a perception that teachers can be recalcitrant and resistant to change, there's plenty of evidence that we often are willing to face the challenge of change (e.g., Richardson & Placier, 2001). We do so because our psychic energy and reward comes from improving learning for our students. We do so in the hope that our efforts will contribute to making their lives better.

*For teachers, change is inevitable. Dreading change does not have to be.* There's an impressive body of literature, much of it from the field of management, designed to help people understand the change process so they can navigate it more easily. Understanding the principles and processes of change can help people in all sorts of complex organizations—in hospitals, airlines, and software companies, and also in schools (Fullan, 2001).

Unfortunately, the literature on educational change has been written primarily for administrators, not teachers. It overlooks the teacher's point of view, likely because the

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<sup>1</sup> See the preface for details about the survey, which is reproduced as Appendix A.

## Introducing the Challenges of Change for Teachers

impetus for change too often has come from people outside the classroom who determine that teachers must change what they are teaching, how they are teaching, or both. This top-down, mandated approach to change has not met with much success (Richardson & Placier, 2001) and too often has led to articles like the dismally titled “Why Teachers Resist Change (and What Principals Can Do About It)” (Richards, 2002).

With this book we hope to change things. *A Teacher’s Guide to Change* was written to

- describe and analyze the changes teachers are likely to encounter across a career in education;
- help teachers understand the change process;
- lead teachers to examine and evaluate their typical responses to change, so they can alter them if they choose;
- demonstrate to teachers that they have the ability to do more than just survive change;
- teach them skills for navigating and managing change successfully; and
- encourage them to lead others in change.

*Our purpose is to help teachers face the challenge of change with optimism and confidence, because we believe that will enable them to enjoy long and happy careers in education—and as a result, students will benefit.* Huberman, Grounauer, & Marti (1993) found that teachers who have the highest level of professional satisfaction, sustained over many years, are those whose careers have been characterized by significant changes in grade levels, schools, and positions. Huberman interviewed a group of these teachers when they had between 30 and 40 years of experience, and he described them as “still energetic and committed, distinguish[ing] themselves from others by virtue of having a harmonious career at the outset and in their last phase” (Huberman et al., p. 250).

You will meet many such teachers in the pages of this book, and at times you will hear in their voices the trepidation and anxiety most of us experience when facing change. While some recount disappointing outcomes, most conclude that change has been a learning experience that helped them become better teachers. The stories of their experiences with change are the lifeblood of this book. In addition, you will find ways to make this book your own, by completing the Change Challenges we have developed, stimulated by the thoughts of participating teachers. We hope that this book will inspire you to reflect on the experiences you have already had and look ahead with new insights to the changes that await you.