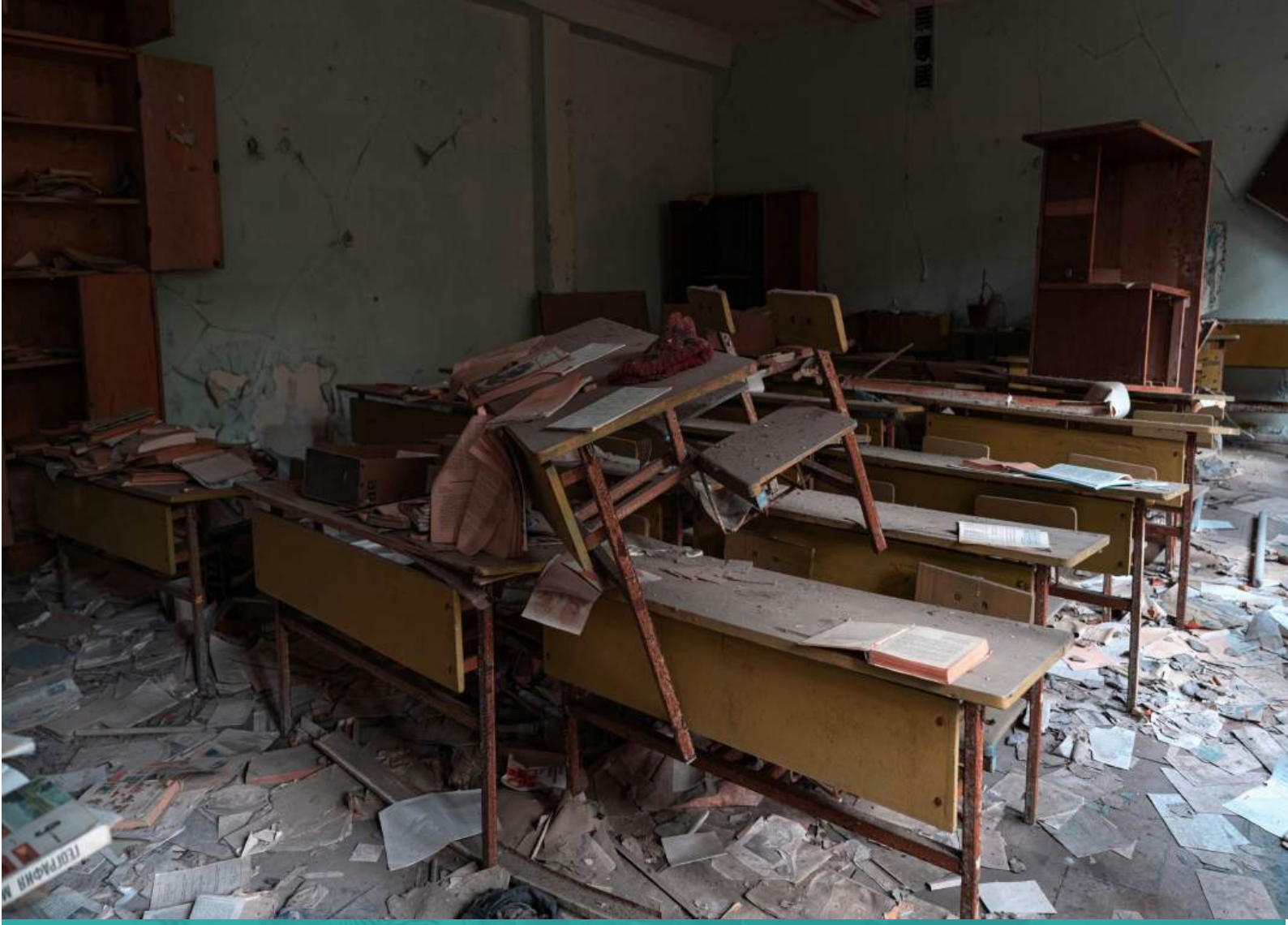

PATTERNS OF REFORM FAILURE

What's holding us back from transformation?

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MARCH, 2025

Future Makers

Patterns of Reform Failure, published March, 2025

Cover photo by VIKTOR HESSE ON UNSPLASH

Published by FutureMakers Ltd.
www.futuremakers.nz

FutureMakers is an independent education consultancy company providing future focused strategic support and professional learning to educational institutions in New Zealand and internationally. The company mission is to inspire the next generation of leaders, thinkers and problems solvers.

How to reference this paper
Wenmoth, D. (2025). *Patterns of Reform Failure,* Wellington, FutureMakers Ltd.

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Introduction

Our education system isn't broken. It's functioning exactly as it was designed.

Our Current Reality

Our education system stands at a critical juncture. Despite declarations of intent to create an inclusive, learner-centred system, we remain tethered to outdated paradigms that fail our tamariki and rangatahi. The statistics tell a stark story, particularly for Māori and Pasifika youth, whose disproportionate rates of academic failure, depression and suicide attempts reveal the human cost of our systematic shortcomings.

In addition to our struggle with addressing equity issues for Māori and other underserved learners, we are also falling short in preparing students for an ever-changing future. Despite the New Zealand Curriculum being designed to be enabling and future-focused, its potential has yet to be fully realised. The system's child-centred approach, rooted in outdated industrial-era models, is failing to equip students with the skills needed for jobs that haven't been created yet. This misalignment between education and future workforce needs is evident in the fact that 34% of students believe their schools are not preparing them for success in the job market.

Furthermore, the education system's focus on standardised testing and traditional subject-based curricula is inadequate for developing the blend of intelligence (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ), and resilience (RQ) that students will need to navigate an era of constant change and innovation. As automation and artificial intelligence threaten low-skilled jobs, the need for a well-educated workforce has never been more critical. Yet, New Zealand's declining performance in international education rankings suggests that the system is failing to adapt to these future challenges, potentially setting up a generation for failure in a rapidly evolving global economy.

When you consider the current changes in education being made in New Zealand – and around the world – they reflect the 'reform and improvement' mindset, rather than transformation (with a few significant exceptions). Concerns about falling literacy and numeracy rates are being addressed by initiatives aimed at improving the way maths and reading are taught – and assessed. Solutions for poor attendance are seen as involving a range of measures to get students back to school, and difficulties with attracting and retaining suitably qualified teachers are being addressed through lowering entry standards and time for training. We continue to seek improvement without seriously challenging many of the assumptions upon which our current system is based.

Why Aren't We Better at Doing Change?

Despite decades of reform efforts, the education system consistently struggles to implement meaningful change. This persistent failure stems from a complex interplay of factors that inhibit transformation.

Created in an industrial era to produce standardised outcomes, sort learners into predetermined categories, and maintain existing social structures, the system continues to fulfil its original purpose with ruthless efficiency. The issue is not that the system needs improvement or reform – it needs complete transformation.

When we frame the challenge as one of "reform" or "improvement," we perpetuate the fundamental misconception that the current system's basic premises are sound. We cannot simply

enhance a system designed for a bygone era with different societal needs, values, and understanding of human potential.

Things like the entrenched beliefs about "real" education that so often prioritise traditional methods and standardised testing, making it challenging to adopt innovative approaches even when evidence supports their effectiveness. Similarly, implementation gaps, such as the lack of a clear theory of change and strong leadership, frequently lead to misalignment between policy intentions and practical application.

A lot of reform efforts falter due to a failure to consider internal and external contexts, as well as the necessary change processes. Many reformers tend to maintain an ahistorical outlook, pushing ideas that have failed before or accomplished less than promised.

The system's resistance to loss, coupled with the tendency to underestimate the complexity of change, further compounds these issues. As a result, many well-intentioned initiatives fall short of their goals, leaving a residue of failure that accumulates over time and makes future reforms even more challenging to implement.

Learning From Past Reform Efforts

Over the past few decades in New Zealand, as in many other jurisdictions, we have seen a number of large-scale, system-change initiatives introduced. All are embarked on with the best of intentions, with promises made of delivering positive change that addresses identified areas of need that will ultimately benefit the learners we are seeking to serve.

While there are unquestioningly many benefits that have been gained from these programmes, the scale of impact that may have been achieved has not been fully realised – certainly not in a sustainable manner.

The table below illustrates the gap between what was promised and what was delivered on some of these reform efforts:

Table 1 – Learning From Past Reform Efforts

Initiative	What this Promised/Provided	Shortcomings
Tomorrow's Schools (1989)	• Increased local autonomy and community involvement in school governance • Improved educational opportunities and achievement for disadvantaged groups, particularly Māori children and those from low-income homes • More efficient and less bureaucratic administration of schools • Enhanced home-school partnerships Better targeted resource allocation to schools	• Greater competition • Wide variability in performance both between and within schools • Widened gaps between communities – greater inequities • Increased administrative burden • Uneven outcomes between schools over time • Reinvention of the wheel in many schools without overall system improvement

NZ Curriculum (2007)	• A vision for young people as lifelong learners who are confident, creative, connected, and actively involved • A curriculum that reflects New Zealand's cultural diversity and values the histories and traditions of all its people • Capabilities alongside content • Flexibility for local contexts "Learner-centred" pedagogy	• Emphasis on the 'back half' only • Achievement objectives dominate planning • Significant reduction in prescribed content compared to previous curricula, potentially leading to knowledge gaps • Overemphasis on preparing students for workplaces at the expense of broader educational goals • Concerns about a decline in academic achievement and persistent disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged students
Kahui Ako (Communities of Learning)	• Develop collective responses to local challenges • Build professional capability through collaboration • Focus on student achievement challenges • Create pathways across education levels • Enable smoother transitions for learners between schools	• Achievement challenges often became compliance exercises • Leadership roles sometimes created tension within and between schools • Bureaucratic requirements overshadowed genuine collaboration • Time and resource constraints limited meaningful engagement • Artificial groupings that didn't always reflect natural communities • Funding model reinforced hierarchical rather than collaborative relationships
Ka Hikitia	• Māori achieving success as Māori • Building cultural responsiveness • System-wide change for equity	• Focus on activities rather than deep change • Limited impact of core teaching practices • Overburdened Māori staff – system barriers
NCEA	• Recognition of diverse forms of learning • Providing more flexibility in senior secondary learning • Promoting lifelong learning competencies • Recognising success as progression • Supporting a very significant increase in school leaver achievement	• Many schools continued to translate achievement standards into traditional numerical grades • The focus shifted to credit accumulation rather than genuine learning progression • Assessment became more granular and bureaucratic, rather than holistic • The system's flexibility became viewed as a weakness rather than a strength • Its potential for recognising diverse forms of achievement was largely unrealised

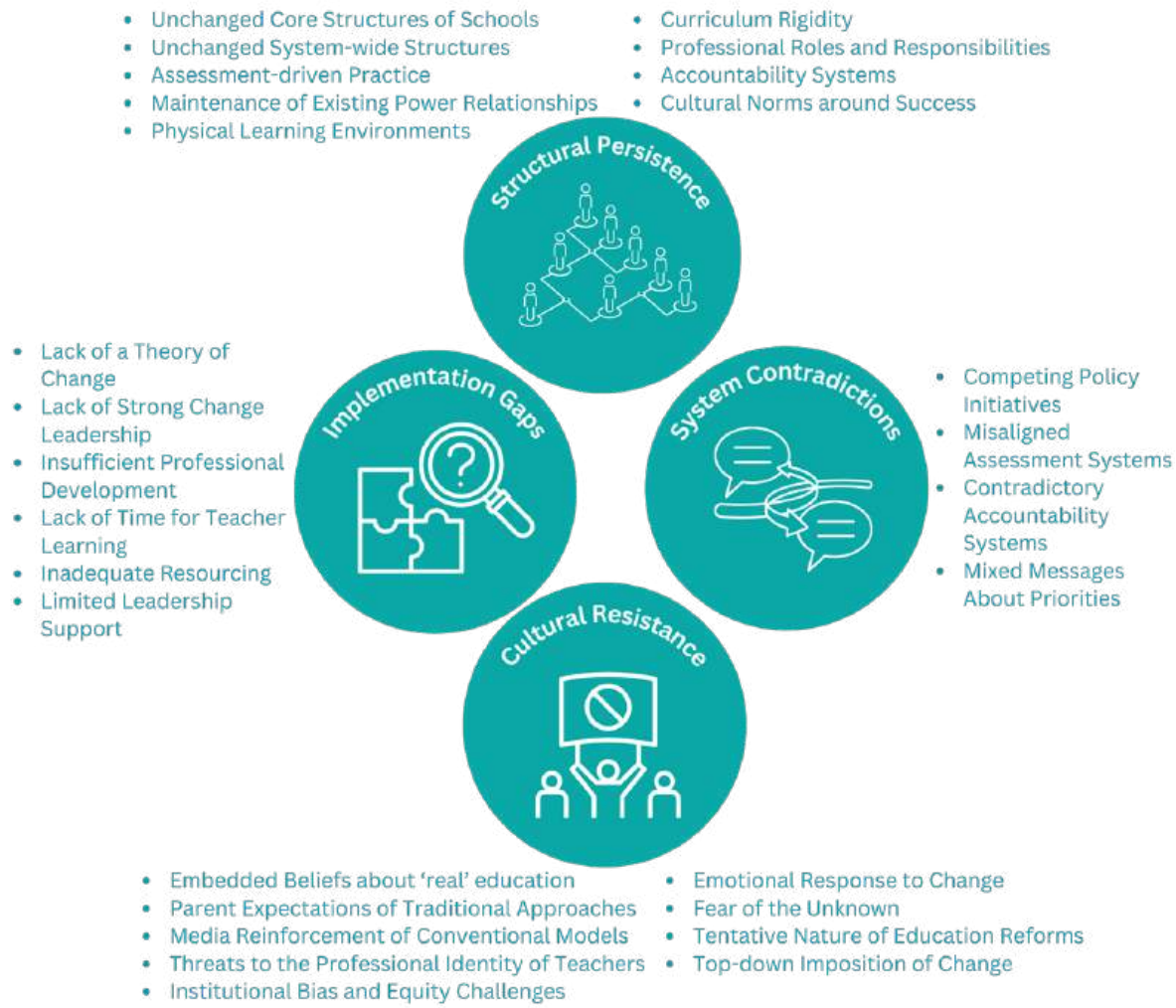
Innovative Learning Environments (ILEs)	• Fostering creativity, collaboration and student-centred learning • Intentional linking of pedagogy and space	• Adoption of physical changes without transforming pedagogical approaches • Teachers were expected to work in new spaces without adequate professional development in new ways of teaching • Traditional timetabling, curriculum delivery, and assessment practices remained unchanged • Tension between innovative spaces and conventional practices leading to frustration and calls to return to single-cell classrooms
Modern Learning Practice (MLP)	• Learner-centred approaches • Project/problem-based learning • Digital integration, collaborative teaching • Flexible learning pathways	• Technology being used to replicate traditional practices • Collaborative teaching hindered by traditional timetabling • Assessment requirements limiting innovation • Professional development not matching ambition • Parent resistance to unfamiliar approaches
National Standards (2010 – 2017)	• Clear expectations of achievement Better information for parents and whānau • Earlier identification of learning needs • Ability to target resourcing to areas of need based on data	• A narrowed curriculum focus • Increased testing and labelling • Contradictions with NZ Curriculum's flexibility • Creating artificial benchmarks • Damaging student confidence and motivation

Four Key Areas of Failure

> *"Every reform, however necessary, will by weak minds be carried to an excess that itself will need reforming."*
> Samuel Taylor Coleridge

As addressed in the introduction to this paper, we have seen numerous attempts to introduce large-scale, system-wide change into our education system over recent decades, and, while benefits have been realised from many of them, our system remains fundamentally unchanged and so the true potential of these reforms are either unrealised or not sustained.

The next section of this paper explores some of the reasons for this failure which are clustered into four key areas as illustrated below:



Each of these areas and the reasons as illustrated above is explained in more detail on the following pages. The list is by no means exhaustive, but does serve to capture what some of the major reasons are, and are intended to provide a provocation for further thought and action (see section titled Call to Action on pages 19 – 24.

1. Structural Persistence

"Resistance to change is proportional to how much the future might be changed by the given act ".
Stephen King

A key reason for why change is often slow or resisted is the issue of structural persistence – the deep-rooted tendency of educational institutions and broader educational systems to maintain their fundamental structures despite reform efforts. This stubborn adherence to traditional structures and practices, despite attempts at change, manifests in a number of ways, including:

a. Unchanged Core Structures of Schools

One of the most visible aspects of system persistence is the continued reliance on long-established organisational elements. Timetables remain rigidly structured, dividing the school day into discrete periods that may not align with optimal learning patterns. The division of knowledge into distinct subjects persists, often failing to reflect the interdisciplinary nature of real-world problems and modern workplaces. Additionally, the grouping of students by age into year levels continues, despite research suggesting that ability-based or mixed-age groupings might be more effective for some learners.

b. Unchanged System-wide Structures

Equally significant are the system-wide structures that resist change: standardised funding models that perpetuate resource inequities, inflexible teacher accreditation systems that may not recognise diverse forms of expertise or emerging pedagogical approaches, and policy frameworks that struggle to adapt to rapidly evolving societal needs and technological possibilities. These entrenched structures at both levels – institutional and systemic – create a complex web of resistance to meaningful change.

c. Assessment-Driven Practice

Traditional approaches to assessment represent another critical aspect of system persistence. Despite much progress towards adopting more authentic evaluation approaches, standardised testing and summative assessments continue to be seen as the 'silver bullet' by many educators and governments when faced with perceived failure at a system level. These assessment structures often drive teaching methodologies backward, encouraging educators to "teach to the test" rather than embrace innovative pedagogical approaches. This assessment-driven culture reinforces conventional teaching methods and can stifle attempts to implement more progressive, student-centred learning experiences.

d. Maintenance of Existing Power Relationships

Perhaps most significantly, system persistence manifests in the maintenance of existing power relationships within educational institutions. Traditional hierarchies between officials, leaders, teachers, and students remain largely unchanged, with decision-making power concentrated at the top. This power structure can resist bottom-up innovation and limit the agency of both teachers and students in shaping their educational experience. When combined with entrenched structural

practices, these power dynamics create a self-reinforcing system that naturally resists substantial change.

e. Physical Learning Environments

The design of physical learning spaces often reflects outdated educational paradigms. Despite the push for innovative learning environments, many schools still rely on traditional classroom layouts with rows of desks facing a teacher at the front. This setup reinforces teacher-centred instruction and limits opportunities for collaborative, student-centred learning. Even in schools that adopt open-plan spaces or flexible furniture, the underlying practices often remain unchanged, as teachers may lack training or support to utilize these environments effectively.

f. Curriculum Rigidity

While there has been significant progress in NZ schools towards embracing more personalized and culturally responsive curricula, many system leaders continue to emphasize a one-size-fits-all approach that prioritizes coverage of content over deep engagement or critical thinking. This rigidity can stifle innovation and limit the ability of schools to respond to the diverse cultural, social, and economic realities of their students.

g. Professional Roles and Expectations

The roles and expectations of teachers and school leaders are deeply rooted in traditional structures. Teachers are often expected to act as sole authorities in their classrooms, while leaders focus on administrative tasks rather than instructional leadership. These entrenched roles can prevent educators from embracing collaborative practices or experimenting with new pedagogies. Moreover, professional development often focuses on compliance with existing policies rather than fostering creativity or adaptability.

h. Accountability Systems

In New Zealand, the Education Review Office (ERO) has focused on supporting self-review, rather than mandating any hard measures of success for the last twenty years. Despite this, some schools have interpreted the performance reviews and school evaluations as emphasising compliance with standardised metrics rather than fostering innovation or long-term improvement. This perspective discourages risk-taking among educators and leaders, as they fear penalties for deviating from established norms, often reinforcing the status quo rather than driving transformative change.

i. Cultural Norms Around Success

Deeply ingrained cultural norms about what constitutes "success" in education also contribute to structural persistence. For example, success is often equated with high test scores or university entrance rates, sidelining other important outcomes like creativity, well-being, or social-emotional development. These narrow definitions of success shape decision-making at all levels of the system and perpetuate traditional practices that prioritize measurable outcomes over holistic education.

These elements of system persistence collectively create a self-reinforcing cycle that makes substantial change difficult to achieve. As core structures remain unchanged, they continue to shape expectations and practices, which in turn reinforce the existing system. Breaking this cycle requires a comprehensive approach to reform that addresses not just individual elements but the interconnected nature of the educational ecosystem.

2. Implementation Gaps

"Change cannot be put upon people. The best way to instil change is do it with them. Create it with them."
Lisa Bodell

Implementation gaps represent a critical factor in the failure of education reform efforts. These gaps often manifest in several interconnected areas, with the lack of a theory of change and strong change leadership being particularly impactful.

a. Lack of a Theory of Change

A well-developed theory of change provides a roadmap for how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context, helping stakeholders understand the logic behind the reform, the steps needed to achieve desired outcomes, and how to proactively address potential barriers along the way to a more equitable education system. Without it, reform efforts often lack coherence and direction.

Too often there is little or no attention given to the theory of change, with all of the attention (and resources) going into the change itself. The absence of a clear theory of change will inevitably lead to misalignment between policy intentions and practical implementation, making it difficult to measure progress and evaluate success. This, in turn, creates confusion among educators about the purpose and process of the reform – and leaves governments and funding agencies unable to identify whether the initiative has been successful or not.

Research indicates that complex problems in education demand complex policy responses, and quick-fix solutions are unlikely to be successful. A robust theory of change can help address this by providing a framework for long-term, systemic change.

b. Lack of Strong Change Leadership

In addition to a well-developed theory of change, strong change leadership is essential for guiding reform efforts and overcoming resistance to change. Effective leaders need to articulate a clear vision, build coalitions of support, and manage the implementation process.

The absence of strong change leadership is likely to result in a lack of buy-in from teachers and other stakeholders, leading to inconsistent implementation across different parts of the education system and failure to address systemic barriers to change.

Leaders play a crucial role in creating contexts where classroom learning can be supported and enhanced. They need to understand the fundamental principles of the change effort and be able to deepen and extend it in response to changing circumstances over time.

In their book Leadership for 21st Century Learning[1], Latchem and Hanna identify three characteristics of effective leaders that are essential when it comes to leading change. From their research they concluded that effective leaders (a) have a vision, (b) are skilled at articulating that vision, and (c) engender trust among those they lead to pursue that vision. Further, they state that all three must be present (i.e. it's no use having a vision if you can't articulate it so that it makes

[1] https://www.routledge.com/Leadership-for-21st-Century-Learning-Global-Perspectives-from-International-Experts/Latchem-Hanna/p/book/9780749432041

sense to others. Similarly, it's no use simply espousing a vision if others don't trust what you're doing or saying!) Sounds like common sense – but how often do we find one or more of those qualities absent in those trying to lead a change initiative?

The lack of a theory of change and strong change leadership significantly affects other areas of implementation, including:

c. Insufficient professional development

Without a clear theory of change, professional development efforts may lack focus and coherence. This can result in fragmented, ineffective training that fails to address the specific needs of educators and doesn't align with the overall goals of the reform. Consequently, teachers may not only struggle to implement new practices effectively in their classrooms but also become discouraged by the perceived lack of relevance or practicality of the training. This discouragement can lead to resistance to change, as educators may view new initiatives as just another passing fad rather than a meaningful improvement. Over time, this cycle of inadequate professional development and resulting resistance can create a culture of cynicism towards reform efforts, making future changes even more challenging to implement.

d. Lack of time for teacher learning

Strong leadership is needed to prioritize and allocate time for teacher learning within the school day. One study found that most teachers have only about 45 minutes of planning time per day, which is often insufficient for meaningful learning and collaboration. This limited time hampers teachers' ability to engage in deep reflection, collaborative planning, and continuous improvement of their practice. Some common examples of how time can be created for teacher learning that schools use currently include:

- Regularly scheduled days (e.g. late-start or early-release days)where students arrive later or leave earlier, providing dedicated time for teacher professional development and collaboration.
- Reorganising the school day to create longer periods of uninterrupted time for teacher learning and planning.
- Providing release time for teachers to participate in workshops, observe colleagues, or engage in collaborative planning sessions.
- Using online platforms for asynchronous learning and collaboration, allowing teachers to engage in professional development at flexible times.

These approaches can help ensure that teachers have structured, uninterrupted time to focus on their own learning and growth, ultimately benefiting student outcomes.

e. Inadequate resourcing

A well-developed theory of change should help identify necessary resources, while strong leadership can advocate for and allocate these resources effectively. By resourcing we include time, physical resources, human resources, financial resources and digital resources – all need to be considered and addressed as required.

Moreover, simply having resources isn't enough. There needs to be ongoing support and training to ensure that resources are used appropriately and effectively. Without this support, expensive equipment may go unused or be misused, and digital platforms may be underutilised.

This comprehensive approach to resourcing is crucial for successful implementation and sustained change. Without this, schools may face shortages in materials, technology, or support staff needed

to implement changes successfully. This can lead to uneven implementation and frustration among educators.

f. Limited support for leadership

Providing targeted support for leaders at various levels of the education system is essential for a successful change process. Failing to do so will likely result in a lack of alignment between national, school, and classroom-level leadership, hindering the overall success of reform efforts. Additionally, leaders may struggle to guide their teams effectively through the change process.

This limited support for leadership can have profound impacts on educational leaders and the change initiatives they are tasked with implementing. For example, many educators transition into leadership roles without receiving sufficient training in the specific skills required for effective administration and leadership.

This lack of preparation can leave leaders feeling overwhelmed and ill-equipped to handle the complexities of their roles. The high expectations and pressure placed on educational leaders, combined with inadequate support, can lead to significant stress and burnout. This may result in frequent leadership transitions, further destabilizing reform efforts.

As leaders face repeated challenges and setbacks due to insufficient support, they may develop cynicism toward educational change. This cynicism can negatively affect school culture, academic achievement, and leaders' altruistic behaviours.

The assumption that individuals in leadership positions automatically possess the knowledge and tools to lead sophisticated change is often misguided. Strong teaching skills do not necessarily translate into effective leadership skills, and many leaders find themselves lacking in crucial areas such as strategic thinking and conflict resolution.

Without proper support and a clear theory of change, leaders may struggle to implement reforms effectively. This can lead to a cycle of failed initiatives, further eroding confidence in the change process and contributing to organizational cynicism.

To address these issues, it's crucial for educational systems to invest in comprehensive leadership development programs, implement mentorship and support networks, and create collaborative partnerships between districts and school leaders. By providing targeted support and recognizing the complex skills required for effective change leadership, educational systems can better equip their leaders to navigate the challenges of reform and foster a more positive, change-ready culture.

Addressing these implementation gaps requires a comprehensive approach that starts with developing a strong theory of change and fostering effective change leadership. This foundation can then support more effective professional development, allocation of time and resources, and ongoing support for both teachers and leaders throughout the reform process.

3. Cultural Resistence

"Culture does not change because we desire to change it. Culture changes when the organization is transformed—the culture reflects the realities of people working together every day."
Francis Hesselbein

Cultural resistance describes the shared beliefs and practices that bind the particular community affected by the change. This presents a significant obstacle to education reform efforts, as stakeholders at various levels cling to traditional approaches and resist change – often without any explicit ownership of the beliefs that underpin them in the first place. This resistance manifests in several key ways:

a. Entrenched Beliefs About "Real" Education

Many educators, administrators, and policymakers hold deeply ingrained beliefs about what constitutes "real" education. These beliefs often prioritize traditional teaching methods, standardized testing, and subject-based curricula.

Such entrenched views can make it challenging to implement innovative approaches or adopt new pedagogical strategies, even when evidence supports their effectiveness.

b. Parent Expectations of Traditional Approaches

Parents often have specific expectations about their children's education based on their own experiences and cultural norms. Research has shown that parental expectations significantly influence children's academic performance and future educational attainment. Many parents may resist changes to educational models they are familiar with, preferring approaches that align with their own schooling experiences.

I should note here that the opposite can and should be true. Parents and whānau should be regarded as collaborators or partners in the learning process, and should be present as contributors to all decisions being made – thus building the sense of ownership and buy-in to what is happening and therefore mitigating the impact of any resistance.

c. Media Reinforcement of Conventional Models

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception of education. News outlets and popular culture often reinforce conventional educational models, presenting them as the norm or ideal. This can create resistance to alternative approaches and make it difficult for the public to understand and accept new educational paradigms.

d. Threats to the Professional Identity of Educators

Education reforms can be perceived as threats to the professional identity and expertise of teachers and administrators. Changes in teaching methods, curriculum content, or assessment practices may challenge educators' established roles and competencies. This perceived threat can lead to resistance, as educators may fear that their skills will become obsolete or that their professional

autonomy will be diminished – leading to acts of industrial action (strikes etc.) that in turn have a negative impact on student learning.

e. Institutional Bias and Equity Challenges

Cultural resistance to change is often compounded by institutional biases embedded within education systems. These biases, such as systemic inequities in access to resources or opportunities based on ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or geographic location, create significant barriers to reform. Efforts to address these inequities may be perceived as threatening by those who benefit from the status quo, further entrenching resistance. For example, initiatives aimed at promoting culturally responsive teaching or equitable resource distribution often face pushback because they challenge deeply ingrained norms and privileges within the system.

f. Emotional Responses to Change

Change in schools often triggers strong emotional reactions tied to identity and values. Teachers' professional identities are closely linked to their beliefs about pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment. When reforms are perceived as misaligned with these beliefs, they can provoke feelings of anger, sadness, or fear of incompetence. This emotional resistance is particularly pronounced when changes are imposed from external authorities without sufficient consultation or alignment with the school's vision and culture.

g. Fear of the Unknown

Resistance is frequently fuelled by uncertainty about how changes will impact daily practices and outcomes. Educators may fear that new approaches will increase their workload, diminish their authority, or fail to deliver promised improvements. This fear is amplified when reforms lack clear implementation plans or adequate support structures, leaving teachers feeling unprepared and vulnerable.

h. The Tentative Nature of Educational Reforms

The cyclical nature of educational reforms—where new initiatives are introduced only to be replaced or abandoned after a short period—can lead to fatigue and cynicism among educators. School leaders, teachers and parents/whānau may view proposed changes as temporary disruptions rather than meaningful improvements, reducing their willingness to invest time and effort into implementation.

i. Top-Down Imposition of Change

Reforms that are designed and mandated at higher levels of governance without involving educators in the decision-making process often encounter significant resistance. Teachers may feel that their professional expertise is undervalued or ignored, leading to a sense of alienation from the change process. This top-down approach can erode trust and cooperation between policymakers and practitioners.

4. System Contradictions

"Really, life is full of contradictions. Life is messy."
Tim Blake Nelson

System contradictions pose significant challenges to education reform efforts, often undermining the very goals they aim to achieve. Often these contradictions are the result of policy changes that have simply been 'layered' onto previous policies, without taking a systemic approach to consider the potential impact of a policy change in one area on what is happening in another. Addressing these contradictions is crucial for creating a coherent and effective educational system.

a. Competing Policy Initiatives

Education systems frequently face conflicting policy directives that can hinder progress. For instance, the current education reform in New Zealand focusing on a knowledge-rich curriculum and explicit instruction may conflict with existing policies that emphasize skills-based, constructivist thinking. Such competing initiatives can create confusion among educators and dilute the impact of reform efforts.

A prime example of policy contradiction lies in the tension between the push for personalised, learner-centred education (as articulated in documents like the New Zealand Curriculum) and the continued reliance on standardised testing and NCEA for assessment. While the curriculum emphasises flexibility, creativity, and holistic development, the high-stakes nature of NCEA and national testing often forces schools to prioritise exam preparation and rote learning, effectively narrowing the curriculum and undermining the very principles of learner-centredness that the policy aims to promote. This creates a contradiction where policy aspires to individualised learning while assessment practices incentivise standardisation and conformity.

b. Misaligned Assessment Systems

Misalignment between curriculum objectives and assessment practices is a common issue in education systems. For example, a study of medical education[2] in 2025 found significant misalignment between assessment items and curriculum objectives, with 238 "alignment flaws" identified across all years of the programme. Such misalignment can lead to unclear or irrelevant feedback for students, difficulty in accurately measuring students' knowledge and skills and compromised validity and reliability of assessments.

For example, misalignment can be seen in the implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum alongside the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). While the curriculum promotes broad capabilities, holistic development, and culturally responsive practices, NCEA, with its emphasis on externally assessed standards and credit accumulation, often drives teaching toward a narrower focus on exam preparation. This misalignment results in teachers feeling pressured to prioritise NCEA requirements over the curriculum's wider goals, leading to a situation where the assessment system inadvertently undermines the curriculum's intent. Educators may express that this makes it challenging to provide authentic and relevant learning experiences.

[2] https://bmcmededuc.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12909-025-06736-4

Students may also become more extrinsically motivated by achieving NCEA credits over understanding the deeper learnings provided in their curriculum.

c. Contradictory Accountability Measures

Accountability measures, while intended to improve teaching and learning, can sometimes have paradoxical effects. High-stakes testing, for example, can lead to a narrowing of the curriculum and teaching to the test both of which can result in increased inequality in achievement. These outcomes often contradict the broader goals of education, such as fostering creativity, critical thinking, and holistic development.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the introduction of National Standards in 2010, while intended to provide clear benchmarks and improve literacy and numeracy outcomes, offers a compelling example of these paradoxical effects. The emphasis on standardised testing to measure student achievement in relation to these standards led, in many schools, to a narrowing of the curriculum. Teachers reported feeling pressured to focus primarily on the skills and content assessed in the tests, often at the expense of broader learning experiences, such as arts, physical education, and inquiry-based projects. This 'teaching to the test' phenomenon, while intended to raise achievement levels, ultimately resulted in a less holistic education for many students and, arguably, contributed to increased disparities in achievement, as schools in more affluent areas were better resourced to provide additional support for test preparation.

d. Mixed Messages About Priorities

The education system often sends conflicting messages about its priorities. On one hand, there's a demand for cultivating each child's individuality and unique talents. On the other, there's an expectation to instil middle-class values like accountability, diligence, and self-control. This cultural contradiction can make it challenging for educators to balance these competing demands.

Addressing these contradictions is essential for achieving "system-ness" – a coherent, aligned, and effective educational system. To move towards this goal there must be a concerted effort made to…

- Articulate a clear vision for education that balances individual development with societal needs. This vision should guide policy-making, curriculum design, and assessment practices.
- Develop assessment strategies that accurately reflect curriculum objectives and learning outcomes. Regular review processes and feedback loops involving students and faculty can help maintain this alignment.
- Design accountability measures that consider multiple aspects of educational quality, not just test scores. This could include measures of student engagement, critical thinking skills, and holistic development. Also, ensure that new initiatives complement existing policies or explicitly replace them, rather than creating conflicting directives.
- Regularly assess the impact of policies, assessments, and accountability measures to identify and address unintended consequences.

By addressing these system contradictions, education systems can move towards greater coherence and effectiveness, ultimately better serving the needs of students, educators, and society as a whole.

Call to Action

> *"In any given moment we have two options: to step forward into growth or step back into safety."*
>
> Abraham Maslow

If we are to achieve the transformational change we seek, indeed, the change that is required, we need to do a better job of addressing the key causes of reform failure outlined in this paper. This will require us to move beyond the piece-meal-ness and short-termism that characterises much of our current efforts.

It's easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of this task – a key reason why so many reform efforts fail. But it is possible if we maintain a 'system-mindset' and ensure what we're doing at whatever level we are in the system is connected with what's happening elsewhere.

Transformational change cannot simply be driven by those at the 'top' (although their vision, leadership and support are critical) – nor can it be driven entirely by those at the 'chalkface' (although their passion, engagement with learners, and close understanding of the issues is also critical). Transformational change requires action at all levels, achieving system coherence as all are working towards the same horizon.

What Change is Required?

Transformational change in education requires coordinated action across multiple dimensions. The framework outlined below identifies three interconnected areas where change must occur simultaneously: in our mindsets about education's purpose, in our daily practices within learning environments, and in the policies that shape our system. Each area contains specific actions that can be initiated by individuals at any level of the system—from ministry officials to classroom teachers, from school leaders to parents and community members.

First, we must see a change of minds—a fundamental shift in our philosophical frameworks and belief systems about what education is and who it serves. This includes challenging deeply held assumptions that keep us tethered to outdated models, recognizing when our attachment to the past impedes progress, and reimagining education's purpose in a rapidly evolving world. Second, we require a change of practice—transforming what happens in schools and classrooms day-to-day, with particular emphasis on shifting ownership of learning to the learners themselves, creating environments where cultural identity is celebrated, and developing authentic connections between education and life beyond school walls. Third, we need a change of policy—reforming the systemic structures around staffing, funding, timetabling, and accountability that too often constrain innovation rather than enabling it.

These action points are not prescriptive mandates, but rather invitations to reflect on your own sphere of influence. Consider which actions align with your position, capabilities, and passion. Some may require direct implementation within your current role, while others may call for advocacy, relationship-building, or coalition-forming. The power of this approach lies in its distributed nature—when individuals throughout the system take ownership of change in their own context while maintaining awareness of the broader transformation, we create momentum that can overcome the inertia of established practices and structures.

1. Changing Minds

GOAL: There is wider public resolve for an approach to education that sees every learner thriving, and a commitment to desiging systems and programmes where the learner is at the centre as both driver and beneficiary.

Sub goals:

- Achieve system coherence in terms of the owned purpose and value of education
- Raise the status of the teaching profession, placing high value placed on education.
- Create opportunties to celebrate evidence of impact, sharing stories of success.

To achieve system coherence in terms of the owned purpose and value of education we could:

- Develop cross-sector forums that bring together educators, parents, learners, policymakers, and community leaders to co-create shared educational visions and values
- Implement strategic communications campaigns that highlight how education connects to broader societal goals and wellbeing
- Create professional learning networks that span different levels of the system and beyond (e.g. business) to build shared language and understanding

To raise the status of the teaching profession and ensure there is high value placed on education we could:

- Advocate for competitive compensation structures that reflect teachers' expertise and impact
- Establish teacher leadership pathways that recognize excellence without requiring teachers to leave the classroom
- Create media partnerships to showcase teacher innovation and impact on learners' lives
- Develop community-educator partnership programs that invite the public into schools to witness quality teaching firsthand

In order to create opportunities to celebrate evidence of impact, sharing stories of success we could:

- Establish regular community showcases where learners present authentic work and growth journeys
- Develop digital portfolios of practice that document both educator and student growth over their learning lifetime (incl. beyond school)
- Create learner-led conferences where students articulate their learning progress to whānau and community and use progression frameworks to link evidence of their learning to demonstrate achievement
- Fund research that captures the qualitative impacts of innovative approaches to learning and assessment

2. Changing Practice

GOAL: Cross-sector, locally appropriate solutions are in place, within a framework of national priorities and resourcing. Educators are actively engaged in sharing practice across networks of expertise.

Sub goals:

- Digital technologies are leveraged to support learner-centred experiences
- New approaches to learning design are embraced to address individual learner needs
- Multiple pathways for learners to experience success and become contributing members of society

To achieve this we must:

Leverage digital technologies to support learner-centred experiences by:

- Implementing adaptive learning platforms that respond to individual learning patterns and needs
- Creating digital portfolios that capture diverse forms of achievement and growth over time
- Developing educator capacity to meaningfully integrate technology as an amplifier and enabler of learning (including for admin and management tasks associate with teaching)
- Ensuring equitable access to devices, connectivity, and digital resources
- Promote networks for learners to access learning from beyond their physical school, and for teachers to teach and share expertise across the network

Embrace new approaches to learning design that address individual learner needs by:

- Creating learning environments (physical and virtual) that celebrate cultural identity and diversity , including designing spaces that reflect and honour local cultural contexts
- Ensuring physical environments support multiple ways of learning and teaching
- Creating flexibility to accommodate different learning styles and needs
- Building support systems that protect and nurture student wellbeing
- Integrating hauora principles throughout the learning experience, including developing strong partnerships with health and social services and establishing effective pastoral care systems

Create multiple pathways for learners to experience success and become contributing members of society by:

- Empowering students to face future challenges with hope and capability
    - Developing problem-solving and critical thinking skills
    - Building environmental and social awareness
    - Fostering entrepreneurial and innovative mindsets
- Redefining the relationship between schools, whānau, and community
    - Creating genuine opportunities for whānau involvement in learning
    - Establishing shared decision-making processes
    - Building strong connections with local iwi and hapū
- Establishing partnerships with industry, tertiary institutions, and community organizations to create authentic learning pathways

3. Changing Policy

GOAL: There is system coherence, uniting agencies and organisations with a common, evidence-based approach to supporting innovative, learner-centred approaches to learning. Educators and learners (and whānau) are actively involved in shaping policy.

Sub goals:

- Establish new measures of success, recognising the capabilities of learners and emerging needs of society.
- Design new resourcing models that are responsive to the needs of diverse groups of learners.
- Advance recognition of life-long learning with seamless transitions and eduring record of learning.

To achieve this we must:

Establish new measures of success that recognise the capabilities of learners and emerging needs of society by:

- Developing new frameworks that capture holistic growth and development
    - Creating reporting systems that reflect the full spectrum of learner capabilities
    - Including cultural and social competencies as core elements of learning
    - Incorporating student voice and self-assessment
- Reforming accountability frameworks to value innovation and equity outcomes
- Building data systems that track longitudinal wellbeing and success beyond traditional academic metrics
- Creating balanced evaluation approaches that honour mātauranga Māori alongside other knowledge systems
- Implementing impact assessments that measure how education contributes to community and environmental wellbeing

Design new resourcing models that are responsive to the needs of diverse groups of learners by:

- Implementing equity-based funding formulas that account for historical disadvantage and current need
- Creating flexible staffing models that allow for specialized expertise and collaborative teaching
- Establishing resource-sharing networks across education settings to maximize investment impact
- Developing procurement policies that prioritise resources reflecting cultural diversity
- Investing in infrastructure that supports inclusive education and multiple learning modalities
- Learning from past reform efforts
    - Acknowledging that piecemeal changes, however well-intentioned, often fail to create lasting improvement – advocate instead for long-term, cross-party commitment to collaboratively agreed goals
    - Ensuring that new initiatives are supported by comprehensive professional learning and development

Advance the recognition of life-long learning with seamless transitions and enduring record of learning by:

- Integrating education with community and social systems
    - Creating meaningful partnerships with local organisations
    - Building authentic connections with industry and employers
    - Establishing reciprocal relationships with cultural organisations
- Developing credentialing systems that recognize formal and informal learning
- Creating interoperable digital portfolios that follow learners throughout their lives
- Establishing transition support systems between education levels and pathways
- Building policy frameworks that recognise multiple entry and exit points in learning journeys
- Designing qualification frameworks that value diverse forms of knowledge and capability

Additional considerations for system-level transformation:

- Establish governance structures that meaningfully include learner, whānau, and community voice
- Create cross-sector coordination mechanisms that align education, health, social services, and economic development
- Develop legislative frameworks that protect innovation while ensuring quality and equity
- Institute regular policy review cycles informed by practice-based evidence
- Build international partnerships to learn from diverse approaches to educational transformation

Time for Transformation: Beyond Words to Action

The path to educational transformation we've outlined isn't simply aspirational—it's imperative. Our current system, despite the best intentions of those within it, continues to fail too many learners, particularly those already marginalized. The consequences of maintaining the status quo are unacceptable, not just for individuals, but for our collective future.

We stand at a crossroads. We can continue the cycle of fragmented reforms that leave fundamental structures unchanged, or we can embrace the discomfort of genuine transformation. This isn't about tweaking what exists—it's about reimagining what's possible.

Ask yourself: What is your sphere of influence? Where do you sit within this system? Whether you're a policymaker, school leader, teacher, parent, student, or community member—you have power to initiate change.

The question isn't whether transformation is possible, but whether we have the collective courage to pursue it. Transformation requires risk-taking, discomfort, and persistent effort in the face of inevitable resistance. It means challenging deeply held assumptions about what education is and could be.

We don't lack knowledge about what needs to change. We lack the sustained will to change it. This isn't someone else's responsibility—it's yours. Today, commit to at least one action from this framework that lies within your power. Then connect with others committed to the same vision.

Educational transformation isn't an abstract ideal—it's a moral obligation we owe to every learner. The time for incremental change has passed. The time for transformation is now.

What will you do today to make it happen?