



WHY SCHOOLS LOSE THEIR CAPACITY TO LEARN

Derek Wenmoth

AUGUST, 2026

future
makers

Why schools lose their capacity to learn. September, 2026

All illustrations in this document created by Derek Wenmoth using Gemini

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.



This work is licensed under Creative Commons 4.0 New Zealand License. In essence, you are free to share this work so long as you attribute this work to FutureMakers. In your attribution, use the wording 'FutureMakers' not the FutureMakers logo. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

How to reference this paper

Wenmoth, D. (2026). *Why schools lose their capacity to learn*, FutureMakers Ltd.

Contents

Contents	3
Executive Summary	4
Introduction.....	5
PART ONE: Organisational Atrophy	6
PART 2: An issue of leadership	10
PART 3: Pathways, not a sequence.....	14
PART 4: The Missing Ingredient: Trust.....	18
PART 5: Stewarding Innovation	23
Concluding Thoughts	27
Further Reading	28

Disclaimer: The content of this paper represents my own thinking and does not reflect the position of any group or agency that I work with currently or in the past. This is an initial version of these ideas which may be expanded upon in future based on feedback and demand. For all inquiries please contact derek@futuremakers.nz

Please support this work

If you have found this resource or others in the series valuable in the work you do, why not consider supporting their development and the development of future publications from FutureMakers. Contribute here - <https://futuremakers.nz/donations/>

Executive Summary

This document started life as a series of four blog posts I wrote after reflecting on my experiences over the past twenty years in which I have had the privilege of working alongside communities establishing many new schools across Aotearoa New Zealand.

At the start of each new build process the excitement is infectious. Freed from inherited routines, these schools begin with bold aspirations, innovative learning environments, and a determination to create something different.

Yet, over time, I have also noticed a recurring pattern. Five or six years later, sometimes more, many of those same schools begin to look remarkably like the schools they were designed to replace. The language of innovation remains, but the habits become increasingly familiar. It isn't because the leaders lacked courage or the ideas lacked merit. Something deeper is happening.

In this document I start by thinking about **organisational atrophy**. I begin by asking what the rise and fall of civilisations can teach us about educational transformation, drawing on historian Arthur Toynbee's work on why some civilisations flourish while others stagnate or decline.

In part two I explore the **leadership** challenge in all of this – not simply starting something innovative, but about knowing how to lead differently as the organisation evolves without losing its capacity to experiment and learn.

I then propose that what we're talking about here is **pathways, not a progression**, noting that innovations don't necessarily fail. Sometimes they simply outlive the question they were designed to answer.

In part four I introduce the idea of **trust** as the missing ingredient here, describing trust as the renewable resource of a learning organisation.

And in part five I suggest that there needs to be more attention paid in this process to the **stewardship** of the vision, noting the difference between leadership as a question about capability (does this person have what it takes to keep the innovation alive?) and stewardship as a question about time (what happens when the person who has what it takes is no longer there?)

Taken together, these five parts make a single argument: that the loss of a school's capacity to learn is not inevitable, nor is it a failure of any one leader or generation. It is a predictable pattern - one that can be understood, anticipated, and actively guarded against. My hope is that this document offers not a formula, but a set of lenses: ways of noticing, earlier than we usually do, when a school is drifting from the very things it set out to become - and what it might take to keep it capable of learning, long after the excitement of the opening day has faded.

Introduction

Imagine if...

Before you read this document I want to invite you to imagine for a moment, what you might do if you had the opportunity to design a new school. Imagine standing at the empty site and the dreams you might have for what could be built there – both in terms of the physical buildings and the activity that takes place within them.



Consider the following questions as a starter:

- What will the architecture and learning spaces look like?
- What's the vision, mission and values - and who gets to decide them?
- How will the curriculum and timetable be structured?
- What pedagogical approach(es) will you commit to?
- How will you select and induct the founding staff?

Now pause. These are all "architecture-and-launch" questions. But a school doesn't live in its founding moment - it lives in every year after. Few founding teams spend much time on what comes next:

- How will you plan for roll growth without diluting what made the school work at 200 students?
- How will new teachers be brought into a culture that has no institutional memory of its founding conversations?
- What happens to the vision when the founding principal - the person who is the vision, in effect - leaves?
- How will you know if the culture is still generating something new, or just repeating itself?
- Who is responsible for noticing decline before it's obvious?

These second questions are harder to answer - and easier to defer - because nothing forces a founding team to confront them on day one. There's no site visit for organisational decline, no ribbon to cut for a culture still capable of learning ten years on. And yet it's these questions, not the first set, that determine whether a school still resembles the one that was imagined - or whether it has quietly become something else.

That's what this thought piece is about: not how schools are built, but why so many of them lose their capacity to learn. The five parts that follow take up this question from different angles - starting with innovation itself, and how quickly even the boldest ideas can settle into routine.

PART ONE: Organisational Atrophy

What the rise and fall of civilisations can teach us about educational transformation

Historian Arnold Toynbee's monumental [A Study of History \(1934–1961\)](#) explores why some civilisations flourish while others stagnate or decline. At the heart of his thinking is a deceptively simple idea: societies grow by responding creatively to the challenges they face. When they stop responding creatively, decline begins.

It seems a very timely idea given the state of political upheaval we're experiencing here in NZ and around the world at the moment, but the more I read, I became distracted from thinking about civilisations and instead thinking about what I see happening in education, and in particular, my experiences with the establishment of new schools. As I reflected on those experiences, I realised that Toynbee's ideas offered a helpful lens for understanding the pattern I'd been noticing for years, but had never really taken the time to describe or explain.

What I've observed and learned

My experience in working alongside communities establishing new schools in Aotearoa began initially in regions where new schools were being planned and built in response to population growth, and then to the re-build of many schools following the earthquakes in Christchurch, and the green-field building of schools in areas of the city where new suburbs were being developed.

The process with new school builds follows a familiar path. Once a site is identified and purchased by the Ministry of Education, an establishment board is created to work on behalf of the community to develop a shared set of beliefs that will guide the vision, mission and values for this new school. These are intended to provide the foundation for a school culture and ways of working that reflect the needs and aspirations of the community.

The process to this point can be straight forward enough when working with the community of an existing school that is undergoing a re-build, or groups looking to establish a new charter school for example. In these cases there is an existing community to work with and consult. But it can be problematic for a green-fields school where there is no established community as the housing developments surrounding the school site are yet to be completed. Identifying whose feedback should inform the strategic vision for the school can be problematic, with the final decisions left to just a small group of people appointed to the establishment board.

Once the vision, mission and values of the school have been established, the next phase in a green-fields build is to engage architects who will use information about the physical site, the vision for the educational approach that has been developed and the guidelines supplied by the Ministry of Education to first come up with a concept plan for what might be developed, and then, through a period of consultation on this, formulate a final plan that can be used to go to tender to find a building company to complete the work.

While the building programme is underway, the establishment board engage in the process of recruiting an establishment principal. This is a part of the process that seems a little 'out of synch' for me – the employing of the principal after all of the visioning work has been done. Generally the requirements for the role include previous experience in leading a school (either as principal or

deputy principal) and a personal philosophy and vision for education that aligns with what the establishment board have developed.

Being a part of this process has been one of the most rewarding opportunities of my career. It's the dream of someone who has devoted much of his career to asking questions about the purpose of education and what will serve us best into the future. Most schools inherit their culture. These schools had the opportunity to create one.

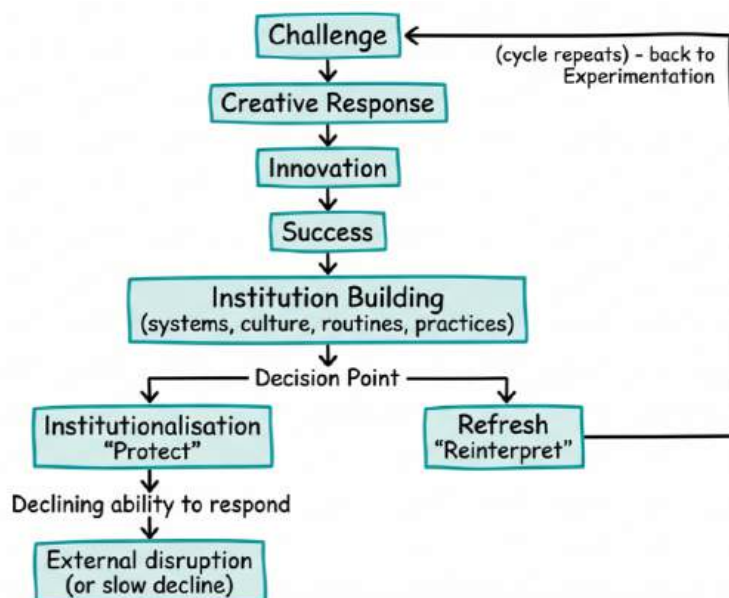
As I've been reflecting on these experiences and looking back over more than two decades of this work, I see some really exciting things that have been achieved. But I have also observed that despite being given such an innovative start, many of these new schools have gradually begun to look remarkably like the schools they were designed to be different from. Not failures. Not poor schools. Simply... familiar.

The Pattern I've Come to Recognise

As I reflected on this I recognised a pattern I've seen emerging. It isn't confined to one school or one community. Nor is it the result of poor leadership or a lack of commitment. If anything, many of these schools were led by some of the most capable and visionary educators I've worked alongside.

At this point I must note that not every school follows this trajectory. I've worked with some schools that have managed to keep returning to each new challenge with the same experimental mindset that drove their founding - refreshing rather than settling. What distinguishes them isn't luck, or the calibre of their original idea. It's something about how they've chosen to keep responding, year after year, as the challenges facing them changed.

The pattern seemed to emerge almost regardless, and I've endeavoured to illustrate it below:



As illustrated here, the new approach generally begins with a **challenge**. A new subdivision and community. A blank piece of land. An opportunity to think differently about what schooling could become. That challenge usually releases enormous creative energy.

Next comes the **design phase** resulting in a **creative response**. The founding members question long-held assumptions. They visit innovative schools. They debate the purpose of education. They imagine new ways of organising learning, designing spaces, building relationships with whānau, and supporting learner agency. The conversations are exciting because almost nothing was taken for granted.

Those innovative ideas are then put into practice. The early years of these schools are characterised by **experimentation**. Staff work collaboratively, adapting as they learned. New routines emerge. Fresh approaches are tested and refined. There is a strong sense that everyone was building something together.

Many of these schools experience **early success** and flourish. But as enrolments grow a different set of challenges emerge. The focus gradually shifts from creating something new to making sure what had been created could be sustained - the focus shifts to building the institution. Systems are documented. Expectations become clearer. Successful practices are embedded so that new staff can learn them quickly. **Consistency** and **coherence** become increasingly important.

None of this was wrong. In fact, much of it was necessary. Growing organisations need reliable systems. Families value predictability. Teachers need clarity. Students benefit from stability. Yet alongside these strengths, something else often began to happen.

Over time the questions become fewer. Experimentation becomes less common. Practices that had once been innovative slowly became “the way we do things here.” The energy that had driven invention is increasingly directed towards protecting what had already been built.

This is the point where school leaders and their communities reach a **decision point** - to focus on the project of **sustaining** the school as an institution - or to embark on a process of **refresh**, to keep things responsive to the new challenges they are presented with. These challenges might be new knowledge about learning, different student needs, developments in technology (AI), changing community priorities etc. All of these things require a school to be '**responsive**' not merely sustaining.

The refresh route repeats the cycle, returning to the identification of new creative responses to the challenges experienced through innovative approaches marked by the preparedness to experiment, permission to take risks, persevere with promising results, and to learn from failure. These lead to new forms of success which, in turn are adopted into the way the school is organised and operates. And so that cycle continues.

The institutionalisation route occurs when the school remains focused on sustaining what has been established, and over time, the school begins operating very much like the ones the original visionaries of the school were trying to ‘break free’ from.

Why this matters

None of this is academic. Every establishment board that opens a new school is, in effect, making a bet - that this time, the bold aspirations in the founding documents will hold. Toynbee's insight is that civilisations don't usually fall because they run out of ideas. They fall because the people responsible for responding creatively stop doing so, often without noticing, and the old patterns quietly reassert themselves under new language.

The same appears to be true of schools. So as you read further through this document, it's worth pausing on a few questions about your own context:

- Where in your school's story would you place yourselves right now - still in the "creative response" phase, or drifting toward institutionalised habit?
- What language has stayed the same in your school even as the practice behind it has quietly changed?
- Who, in your setting, is currently playing the role Toynbee would call the "creative minority" - and are they still being backed, or increasingly worn down?

I don't think there's anything inevitable about the slide from innovative to institutional. But avoiding it seems to depend heavily on the people carrying it - which is where I'll turn next. In the second post in this series, I'll look more closely at the particular qualities of leadership I've seen distinguish the schools that hold their edge from those that don't.

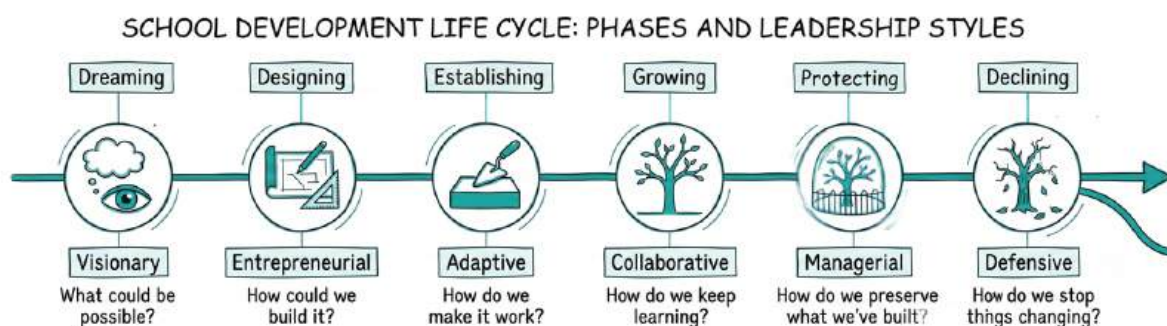
PART 2: An issue of leadership

So why do organisations that were created to challenge established ways of thinking so often find themselves becoming established institutions themselves?

At this point I want to focus specifically on a very important part of this process – leadership. The capacity to lead this sort of process is often assumed by those who are the initiators of the process (e.g. Ministry of Education or Charter School boards for example). While there's often a thorough process in place to appoint the establishment team and principal with the skills and experience to get things up and running, there's often less (if any) attention paid to the leadership attributes that will be required once the school is operating and growing.

The leadership challenge isn't simply starting something innovative; it's knowing how to lead differently as the organisation evolves without losing its capacity to experiment and learn.

I've started to think about the schools I've helped establish in terms of phases - not as a rigid model, but as a rough map of the terrain I've watched schools travel through. I've illustrated this in the diagram below. In this diagram the phases are named across the top of each section and the leadership style at the bottom.



Understanding the importance of leadership

The more I've reflected on this, the more I've come to understand that the issue isn't simply whether a leader is "innovative". Different phases of a school's development call for different leadership dispositions. In the illustration above I've identified six different approaches to leadership that are matched to the six phases of the development life-cycle.

It takes a visionary leader to get things started – to keep an eye on the big picture and bring others on board with that vision, but as the work of establishing the school begins, the leadership style must shift more to an entrepreneurial one as the focus must move to the execution of the vision that has been created.

I'd note here that these aren't necessarily roles occupied by different people - or by the principal alone. Consider, for example, where do you see visionary leadership among your teachers? Who are the entrepreneurs in your staff?

As the school continues to grow and the underpinning processes and supports have been successfully put in place, the challenge becomes how to respond to the pressures of roll growth and new staff – so the leadership needs to be more adaptive as some of the things put in place to work

with the original (often small) group of students, staff and community need to be expanded and to accommodate needs that may not have been previously considered.

This transition can be difficult for some, and may explain why, in so many cases, the establishment principals of many of these new schools move on after 5-6 years in the role. It isn't because they are poor leaders – it's simply that their core strengths as visionaries and/or entrepreneurs, while valuable in the start-up phase, will no longer serve them well as the organisation grows and matures. Their initial enthusiasm for the job wanes and so they move on to the next challenge.

Once things have settled into what may be considered as 'normal' for the new organisation, the leadership must become focused on scaling and sustaining the innovation that was started, and ensuring the school operates effectively as a learning organisation. The key to this is a collaborative leadership style, that recognises the strengths of the team and power of networks to help shape practice. Any form of 'hero' or 'iconic' leadership at this stage will result in the leader becoming overwhelmed and burned out, and members of the organisation feeling disempowered and lacking opportunity to contribute or participate in the changes taking place.

For me, this is the critical phase of leadership. Collaborative leaders are able to manage their role effectively by the agency they provide their staff, with various forms of distributed leadership evident in the way things operate. Collaborative leaders also recognise the importance of networks. They are active in professional learning groups and encourage staff to do the same – whether in person or virtual. They (and their teams) are constantly scanning the environment, subscribing to various forums and newsletters to remain informed about where innovation is occurring in the sector.

Consider where collaborative leadership is demonstrated in your context, for example. Who notices that something isn't working and experiments with another approach? Who connects the school to ideas and practice beyond its walls?

Crucially, this doesn't mean the visionary and entrepreneurial impulses get retired once collaborative leadership takes hold. The best collaborative leaders I've observed make a point of keeping those impulses alive somewhere in the organisation – sometimes in themselves, more often by deliberately creating space for others to hold them. It's less a changing of the guard than a redistribution.

What happens when teachers become the custodians of "the way we do things here"?

At this point things can change markedly. If an organisation can maintain people within it who are the visionaries, entrepreneurs, adaptors and collaborators, it is more likely to succeed as a learning organisation and successfully navigate the complexities of change that will inevitably be encountered.

Sadly, this is also where I've seen some schools default to what I've labelled a managerial mindset. At this point I need to emphasise that I'm not suggesting we don't need good managers. Good management is essential to embedding and sustaining innovation. The problem isn't management; it's when management becomes the dominant leadership response to a changing environment. Where this is the case maintaining established systems and structures dominates any open-ness to change.

This is what I referred to as the 'decision point' in the illustration in my previous post. This is the point at which a school can either continue to treat itself as a learning organisation, or begin to protect what it has established.

What becomes important for some at this point is the preservation of what has been put in place. The idea of establishing and maintaining ‘traditions’ can appeal as a way of building loyalty and a sense of belonging (which I’d agree, has its place) – but often these traditions can also act as a hinderance or roadblock to change that may be important to pursue. (Consider here the challenges face by some single sex schools when the idea of becoming co-ed is introduced, or when a suggestion is made to abolish long-established ‘departments’, for example, in favour of some other staffing structure that is better suited to the needs of the students and/or curriculum).

The longer the manager-leadership style continues, the more likely we’ll see the emergence of the defensive leader – whose priority is to defend the status quo, and to actively resist change. In fact, change is often used as the reason to excuse poor performance. Often, a defensive leader will feel they are ‘trapped’ with few options as the relentlessness of change cascades upon them, and they lack the network of support and understanding that the collaborative leader encourages for example.

This has particularly important implications at a time where we see a plethora of leadership development programmes emerging – the question I’d be asking is “Are we preparing leaders to lead schools at different stages of development - or simply preparing people to occupy leadership positions?”

I’ve summarised how these approaches differ in the table below:

The six leadership dispositions across the life of a school

Disposition	Core Focus	Risk Profile	Relationship to Change	Working Style
The Visionary	Imagining big, new concepts and long-term changes	Intellectual risk: Risks being misunderstood	Future-focused: Driven by what could be	Big-picture thinker: Ignores small details for the ultimate goal
The Entrepreneur	Turning ideas into real, working businesses	Risk-taker: Puts personal time and money on the line	Problem-solver: Adapts fast when things go wrong	Action-driven: Focuses entirely on tangible execution
The Adaptive	Continuous improvement and fluid execution	Calculated risk: Experiments with new workflows	Highly responsive: Constantly reacts to internal/external shifts	Flexible: Refuses to get locked into a set way of working
The Collaborative	Collective intelligence and horizontal networks	Shared risk: Relies on group buy-in	Network-driven: Uses shared learning to navigate transitions	Involving: Scans external practice and involves others to learn
The Manager	Rules, plans, and steady daily work	Risk-averse: Works to keep things safe and avoid losses	Stability-focused: Preserves current functional systems	Organizer: Directs people and tasks to make systems run well
The Defensive	Status quo preservation and personal comfort	Risk-phobic: Minimizes personal exposure	Resistant: Looks for ways to avoid or stop change happening	Obstructive: Uses top-down, imposed change as an excuse

In my representation of the phases I see the first four phases of development and leadership as being a ‘healthy’ development and one we should be intentionally seeking to encourage and nurture through the leadership programmes available in our sector. Sadly, I don’t see this being the case – there’s too much simply left to chance at a system level and many school leaders (i.e. principals

already in the role and senior leaders who may be aspiring to those roles) left to navigate their own way through this maze of decision making etc.

The fortunate ones may have been mentored by effective leaders in the past and experienced the sorts of collaborative and responsive approaches that are necessary. But there are those who have missed this experience and suddenly find themselves in a position of leadership without the broad range of knowledge and skills required to make them effective in any of the first four approaches outlined above – and in worst case scenario, start their role by adopting a managerial approach.

The education half-life of schools

The tragedy, as I see it, is that so many schools get stuck in that fifth phase – managing and protecting what was built rather than continuing to build. Every educational innovation, I've come to believe, has a half-life. Not because the original idea was wrong, but because the problem it was designed to solve doesn't stay still. Schools don't become less innovative because their founding vision was flawed. They become less innovative when a vision that once answered a real question keeps being applied to questions it was never designed for. That is, new questions - not the original question.

As I worked to develop this table it occurred to me that what I've seen happening in these new schools as they grow and respond to change is that one of two things occurs. Either the original visionary or entrepreneurial leader moves on to another 'startup' challenge, handing the reins to another leader chosen because of their ability to advance things to the next level of organisational maturity. Or, the original leader continues in the role but is able to change the way in which they lead. These leaders are the ones that succeed in scaling and sustaining the innovative practices that were there in the beginning, but are agile in their approach to establishing the organisational systems and processes to avoid them becoming locked into something that can't be changed.

Before I am accused of making too broad a generalisation here I need to acknowledge that there are schools I'm aware of where this isn't the case. In these schools I've observed the principal and senior leadership demonstrate the ability to shift their leadership focus and approach to successfully navigate the next phase of the school's development. These are the schools I look to for inspiration – leading a well-established school is a genuinely different challenge to leading a new one. One isn't better than the other - they simply require different strengths.

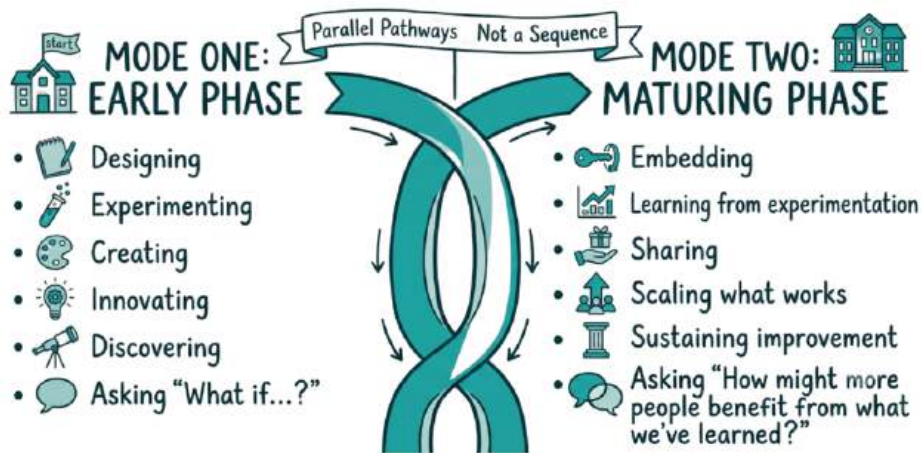
PART 3: Pathways, not a sequence

Innovations don't necessarily fail. Sometimes they simply outlive the question they were designed to answer.

The challenge then isn't building an innovative school. I've argued so far that a visionary and an entrepreneur, given the right mandate and opportunity, can do that. Give a group of committed educators a clear philosophy, a blank site, and a bit of room to move, and something genuinely new will emerge. That part is the easy part.

The harder challenge - the one that actually determines whether any of it lasts - is leadership that keeps learning long after the founding vision has been realised. Innovation isn't a destination a leader arrives at and then occupies. Transformation isn't a programme a leader runs once and rolls out. Both are better understood as an ongoing leadership discipline - keeping the organisation's capacity to learn alive, deliberately, over time.

At this point it's worth returning to the table from the previous section, because I think it points somewhere different when you read it a second time - not as a *sequence* of phases a leader passes through and leaves behind, but as two modes of leadership a mature leader learns to hold at once.



What I've tried to illustrate here is that this isn't a sequence. It's not that a leader runs the left-hand column for a few years and then graduates to the right, retiring the visionary and the entrepreneur along the way. It's a cycle, and what distinguishes the leaders who sustain it is that they've learned to hold both columns at once - they don't stop experimenting once they start embedding and scaling, they get better at experimenting, precisely because they've learned how to learn from what they try.

That's really what a culture of experimentation means, in practice. It's an ongoing willingness to take risks, to treat failure as information rather than embarrassment, and to keep asking "what if" even once the systems and processes that made the school work are firmly in place. The danger isn't that a school stops innovating on some identifiable date. It's quieter than that - it's that the systems built to embed and scale the early innovations gradually harden into the very things that make asking "what if" feel risky, or irrelevant, or someone else's job.

There's a really important distinction to be made here between **embedding innovation** (i.e. making successful practice easier, more sustainable and less dependent on individuals), and **institutionalising innovation** (i.e. turning something that once solved a problem into a fixed way of doing things.)

A school that's stopped experimenting rarely notices the moment it happened. It just notices, years later, that no one's asking the question anymore. Which is, in the end, a leadership choice as much as a cultural one - and perhaps the clearest marker of the leaders who make the whole arc, from dreaming through to a mature, sustaining organisation, actually work.

The real problem isn't innovation

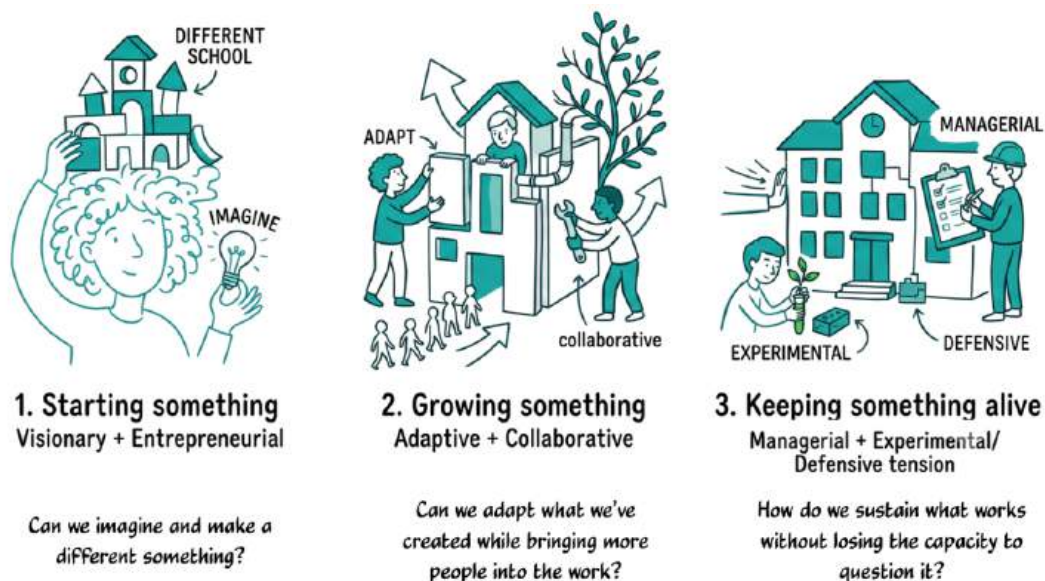
Having presented my thoughts based on the observations I've made over the past couple of decades, I want to suggest a revision to the original illustration of the six phases I introduced earlier.

The six phases remain useful for describing the different leadership dispositions I've observed, but presented as a sequence they can imply an inevitability to the journey - that schools move from vision and innovation towards management and, ultimately, defending the status quo. But that needn't be the case.

As I've argued in the previous section, effective leadership must hold the tension between the dispositions that are important in the early stages of a school's development and those that become increasingly important as the organisation matures. The challenge is not to move from one set of dispositions to another, but to find ways of keeping them alive and in productive tension.

Again I argue that the key lies in creating a culture of experimentation - one where established practices are continually examined rather than simply protected; where reflection leads to adjustment; and where there is an ongoing willingness to try, learn and adopt new approaches when circumstances demand it. In other words, the goal is not simply to sustain the organisation we have built, but to sustain the school's capacity to learn.

The illustration below is therefore not intended to replace the six phases, but to offer another way of seeing them.



In this illustration I've condensed the six into three overarching themes: the start-up phase (starting something); the growth phase (growing something); and the sustaining phase (keeping something alive). Each brings together two of the leadership dispositions identified in the earlier illustration.

Importantly, I don't see these as three steps that a school simply moves through. Rather, they represent three ongoing leadership challenges that need to be held together if a school is to remain capable of learning, adapting and renewing itself.

Seen this way, the sustaining phase takes on a rather different meaning. It is not the point at which innovation gives way to management, and ultimately to defending the status quo. It is the point at which the real leadership challenge begins: how do we sustain what we have built while continuing to question whether it is still what our learners and our community need?

This requires holding a productive tension between two impulses. One is the need to **manage well** - to establish systems, embed effective practice, provide consistency and ensure that the organisation functions effectively. The other is the need to **keep experimenting** - to remain curious, to notice when something is no longer working as well as it once did, and to be willing to try something different.

The danger comes when the first impulse overwhelms the second. What was established to support innovation can gradually become something that is protected from challenge. Practices that were once experimental become "the way we do things here"; systems designed to make things work become reasons for not changing them; and the organisation's capacity to learn begins to diminish.

The alternative is not perpetual change for its own sake. It is a culture in which embedding and experimenting coexist - where we are prepared to hold on to what works while remaining willing to ask whether it could work better, or whether changing circumstances call for something different.

That, for me, is the real meaning of sustaining. We aren't simply sustaining the school we have built. We are sustaining its capacity to learn, adapt and renew itself.

Perhaps this is what distinguishes schools that remain learning organisations from those that become institutionalised. The former don't abandon stability, systems or established practice. They simply refuse to let those things become the end of the story.

The question for leadership is therefore not, "How do we stop things changing?" or even, "How do we keep innovating?" It is: "How do we create the conditions in which a school can be both well established and continually learning?"

Reflect

If there's one thing this piece has tried to argue, it's that leadership itself needs to keep learning - that the skills which get a school off the ground aren't the ones that sustain it, and that the leaders who last are the ones who never quite retire the visionary and the entrepreneur, even as they grow into something more collaborative.

So before moving to the next part of this series - where I want to look at what schools themselves can do to guard against decline - it's worth pausing on your own leadership, wherever you sit in an organisation. Use the following questions as a starting point:

- What are we protecting that was originally created to help us learn?"
- What are we doing today because it still serves our learners - and what are we doing simply because it has become the way we do things?
- Is there a "what if" question your school has quietly stopped asking? Who would need to ask it again?
- What needs to change so that we hold 'both columns at once' in the leadership in our school?

None of these have comfortable answers. But that discomfort is probably the point - it's the same "keeping learning" this whole piece has been arguing for, just aimed inward instead of at the organisation.

PART 4: The Missing Ingredient: Trust

There's a piece missing from everything I've written so far, and I think it's the piece that actually matters most.

In some work I've been doing recently with my colleague Harry Mills, we've updated our Friction Free Transformation framework¹ to add a new foundational element: **trust**. It wasn't there originally, and looking back, I think that was an omission worth naming - because a great deal of writing about innovation in education talks confidently about what innovation looks like, and far less about the conditions that make it possible in the first place.

Trust takes time to build, but is broken quickly

Before going further, it's worth being clear about what trust actually is. It isn't automatic in any relationship - it has to be deliberately built, usually over a long period of time. But it's asymmetric: while trust takes time to establish, it can be broken in a moment, and once broken, is far harder to restore than it was to build in the first place.

a. The building side: Bryk and Schneider's "relational trust"

In Bryk and Schneider's decade-long study of Chicago elementary schools undergoing reform² they found that schools with high levels of relational trust among administrators, teachers, parents, and students were far more likely to improve student achievement, and defined that trust through four components: respect, competence, personal regard, and integrity. What should be noted here is that schools weak in trust had virtually no chance of showing improvement in either reading or mathematics, and the researchers described this as the first evidence directly linking the development of relational trust in a school community to long-term improvements in academic productivity.

The mechanism Bryk and Schneider describe is slow by nature. Trust accrues through the ordinary, repeated, small-stakes exchanges of daily school life, be that a principal following through, a teacher being backed up in a difficult parent meeting, a promise kept about workload. Nobody builds relational trust with a single gesture. It is built over time and requires intentional effort and decision making throughout.

b. The destroying side: Slovic's asymmetry principle

At the other end of the scale we can see what happens when trust is broken. Trust is fragile - typically created rather slowly, but destroyed in an instant by a single mishap or mistake - and once lost, it may take a long time to rebuild, or may never be regained. The classic source here is risk researcher Paul Slovic, whose 1993 paper on trust and risk management³ is the origin of what's now called the "asymmetry principle." Slovic offers a genuinely useful explanation for *why*, not just an observation that it happens. He notes that **negative events are more visible than positive ones**, and they carry more weight because they're rarer and higher-consequence - one broken promise stands out against months of quiet reliability the way one flood stands out against years of ordinary

¹ <https://futuremakers.nz/services/friction-free-platform-for-change/>

² <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/trust-schools-core-resource-improvement>

³ <https://scispace.com/pdf/perceived-risk-trust-and-democracy-54i9b1xvnt.pdf>

weather. That gives you a mechanism, not just a metaphor, and it's been replicated well beyond risk management: subsequent research across three decades confirms negative events affect trust more than equivalent positive events build it.

Consider the following examples that illustrate how these things can play out in the context of a school...

1. *Built slowly* - a board and principal spend two or three years earning staff trust through consistent, unglamorous means - workload commitments that are actually honoured, appraisal processes that feel developmental rather than punitive, consultation that visibly changes decisions rather than rubber-stamping them already made. None of it is dramatic. It shows up as staff willingness to take risks with new practice, to surface problems early rather than hide them - exactly the "experimenting with new practice" effect Bryk and Schneider found.
2. *Destroyed quickly* - a single non-consultative restructuring announcement, or a redundancy process handled by the letter of the law but not the spirit of it, can undo years of that work in a single staff meeting. It doesn't matter that it's one decision out of hundreds; it's the one that gets remembered, retold, and treated as evidence of what the institution "really" values - precisely Slovic's point about negative events being disproportionately weighted and disproportionately visible.

One non-consultative decision like the one above doesn't just damage trust in the abstract - it teaches three groups three specific lessons simultaneously:

- *Teachers* learn that visible failure has consequences, so the rational move is to stop attempting anything that could visibly fail - hence experimentation quietly becomes compliance with what's already known to work.
- *Leaders*, having just demonstrated (or witnessed) that uncertainty gets punished, learn to perform certainty even when they don't have it - because admitting "I don't know" now reads as weakness rather than honesty.
- *Students*, watching the adults around them reward the safe answer over the interesting wrong one, learn the same lesson a generation earlier - that a mistake is a deduction, not data.

None of this shows up as a single dramatic event. It shows up as a staffroom where the same three or four people always put their hand up, while everyone else waits to see how it goes. It shows up as a leadership team that has an answer for everything, because admitting otherwise has never once gone well for anyone who tried it. And it shows up in classrooms, where the safest answer beats the interesting one, because a mistake is something you lose marks for, not something you learn from. Three different rooms, three different ages - and the same underlying condition.

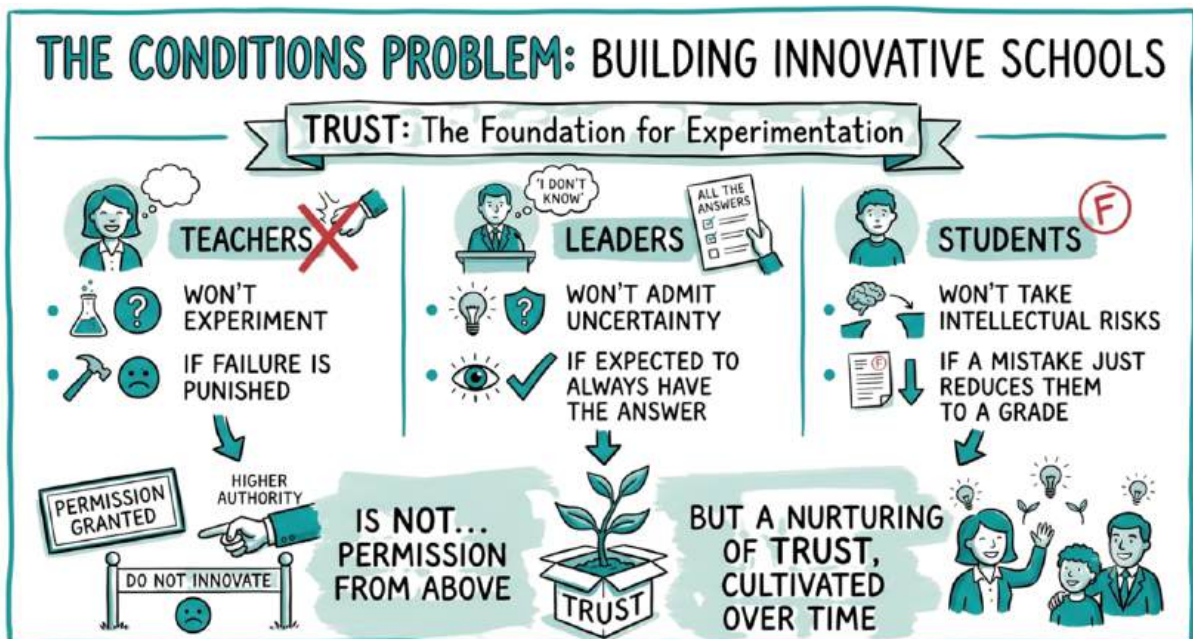
It would be easy to treat these as three separate problems - a staffing issue here, a leadership style there, an assessment culture somewhere else - and hand each one its own fix. That's certainly how most school improvement plans are written. But treating them separately misses what's actually going on, because the teacher who won't experiment, the leader who won't admit uncertainty, and the student who won't risk the wrong answer are all making the same calculation, just from different desks. Each of them has looked at what happens to people who expose themselves, and decided the safer move is not to.

That's not a motivation problem, and it's not a culture problem in the vague, unfixable sense the word usually gets used.

It's a trust problem.

It's the kind of problem Bryk and Schneider described above - respect, competence, personal regard, and integrity. Not a nicety, but the precondition for everything else in this piece.

Here's the conditions problem in its simplest form. Experimentation requires trust. Teachers won't experiment if failure is punished. Leaders won't admit uncertainty if they're expected to always have the answer. Students won't take intellectual risks if a mistake is just going to reduce them to a grade. None of this is complicated, and yet it's routinely overlooked in how we talk about building innovative schools. We talk as though innovation were a matter of permission, granted from above, rather than something that grows out of trust, cultivated over time. It involves the ordinary, unglamorous, repeated stuff of daily practice - a principal following through, a teacher backed up in a hard conversation, a promise kept about workload. None of it looks like reform. All of it is. The illustration below captures this;



Without trust, every one of the things I've been describing curdles into its own hollow imitation:

- experimentation becomes compliance
- inquiry becomes implementation
- accountability becomes surveillance
- innovation becomes performance

With trust, the same ingredients produce something else entirely:

- experimentation flourishes
- professional inquiry deepens
- knowledge is shared
- successful practice is scaled

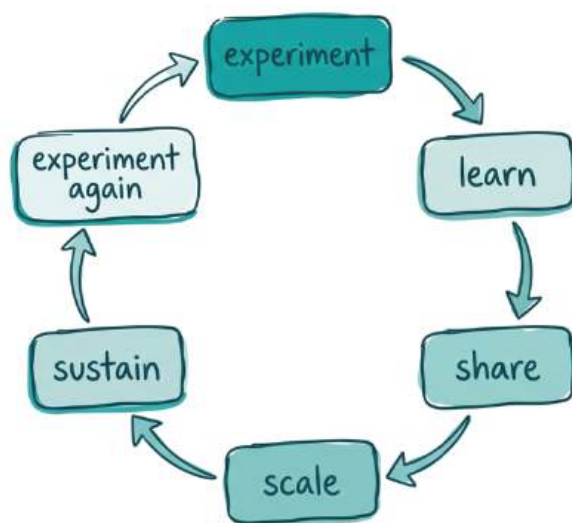
- improvement is sustained
- and new cycles of learning begin

You could even describe trust as the **renewable resource** of a learning organisation.

Trust in the transformation cycle

Everything else I've written about - experimentation, adaptation, the capacity to keep asking "what if" - draws on it. And unlike most resources, trust doesn't get used up by being drawn on. It gets used up by being withheld.

This is where the transformation cycle I've been circling throughout this piece finds its natural home, as illustrated below.



Every loop through that cycle creates new organisational capability. But it's trust that keeps the loop turning. Take it away, and the cycle doesn't just slow down - it seizes. People stop experimenting because experimenting without trust is just exposure. And a school that's stopped experimenting, as I've already said, rarely announces the moment it happened. It just quietly stops asking the question.

Which is why the question worth asking about any school isn't whether it has stayed faithful to its founding vision. Visions age. Contexts change. Holding onto the original idea too tightly can be its own kind of failure. The better question - the one that actually tells you whether a school is still alive to its own purpose - is simpler than that: is it still learning? In the final post in this series, I want to turn to what it takes to keep answering that question well, over years and even decades, long after the founding energy has faded and the people who asked "what if" at the start have moved on. I'm calling it stewarding innovation - because sustaining trust, and the learning it makes possible, turns out to be a different kind of work from creating it in the first place.

Call to action: Where trust actually gets built

The following ideas give school leaders some actionable ways of building trust that is enduring. Each one draws on a different part of what Bryk and Schneider found trust is actually made of - respect, competence, personal regard, integrity - so think of them less as a checklist and more as four levers a leader has available, worth pulling deliberately rather than leaving to chance.

- **Make uncertainty sayable.** Leaders modelling “I don't know, let's find out” in staff meetings - not as a rhetorical device but as a genuine, repeated practice - does more to license teacher risk-taking than any innovation policy. This is the *integrity* lever: consistency between what's said and what's rewarded.
- **Redesign what gets noticed.** If appraisal, moderation, and staff meetings only ever surface what worked, failure stays hidden and unexamined. Building in regular, low-stakes space to talk about what didn't work - normalised, not confessional - is the *personal regard* lever: it signals people are valued for the attempt, not just the result.
- **Protect the first followers.** The teacher who tries something new and has it not quite work needs to be visibly backed, not quietly steered back to compliance next term. This is where trust is actually spent or protected - the *competence* and *respect* levers together.
- **Separate assessment of risk-taking from assessment of outcome,** for students as much as staff - feedback on the attempt, not just the grade on the result. This is the *respect* lever again: treating someone as more than the result they just produced.

PART 5: Stewarding Innovation

Think about this for a moment. Somewhere, right now, a founding principal who is five or six years into a school they built from nothing, is starting to wonder who's going to carry it once they're gone. Somewhere else, a Minister is signing off on a new school's establishment plan, satisfied that the hard part - the commissioning - is done. Neither of them is wrong about what's in front of them. But both of them are working to a clock that has nothing to do with how long the thing they're building actually needs to survive.

That's the mismatch I want to end this series on. An establishment principal's tenure may run for five or six years. A government's runs three, if it's lucky. A board's runs in three-year cycles as well, and turns over one-third of itself most years. An ERO review cycle can be shorter still. And the culture of a school - the thing that actually determines whether an innovation is still recognisably itself twenty years on - takes a generation to either take root or rot. Nothing in that list is built on the same timescale as the thing it's meant to be protecting.

Schools, obviously, are not civilisations, in the sense that was the focus of Toynbee's work introduced in part one. I'm not suggesting they are. But they are social systems, built by people, sustained by culture, and shaped by the stories they tell themselves about why they exist. And social systems, it seems, are susceptible to a version of the same dynamic.

And here's where I think Toynbee has something to offer beyond the metaphor. His argument, stripped to its essentials, is this: *civilisations rise because they respond creatively to the challenges they face*. And they begin to decline not when the challenges become too great, but when they stop generating new responses - when they fall back, instead, on whatever worked last time. He has a phrase for this that I came across while reading his work: *"the tendency of a society to start worshipping its former self, mistaking the response that once succeeded for a truth that will always succeed."*

History suggests that simply designing and establishing innovative new schools isn't enough. Every generation seems to rediscover this for itself, convinced it has finally found the model that will solve schooling once and for all. Progressive schools. Open-plan schools. MLEs and ILEs. Charter schools. Online schools. Each wave has produced genuinely valuable innovation - I don't want to be cynical about that. **But none of them remained innovative simply by virtue of the design itself.** What determined whether the innovation lasted was whether the school ever developed the capacity to keep adapting - whether it built a culture that could go on responding creatively, long after the founders had moved on.

Which is, of course, where Toynbee's work on civilisations and the work of Peter Senge⁴, Margaret Wheatley⁵, and Edgar Schein⁶ on organisations start to converge on the same conclusion, arrived at from entirely different centuries: resilience was never really about the brilliance of the original response. **It was about whether the system retained the capacity to remain responsive.**

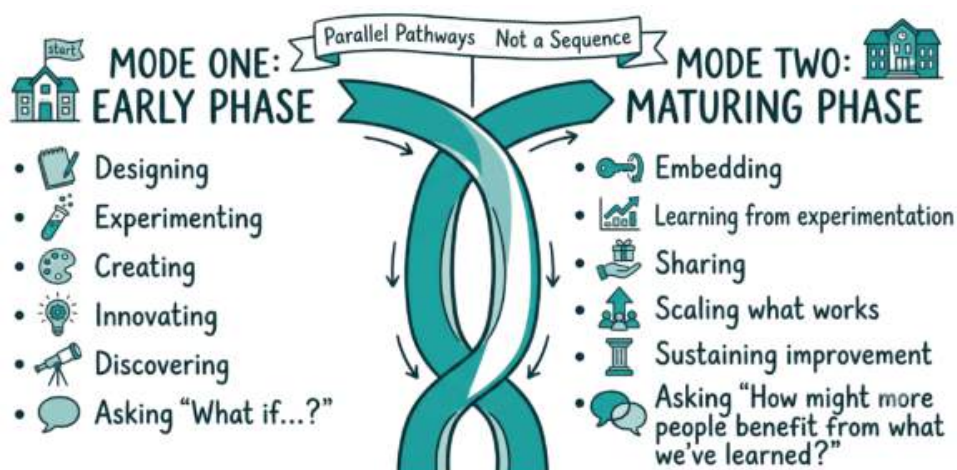
⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Senge

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meg_Wheatley

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Schein

The real challenge isn't innovation

Innovation isn't a destination you arrive at and then occupy. It's better understood as an expression of something deeper: organisational learning, sustained over time. Which means the graphic (below) I introduced in part three of this paper is worth returning to - not as a sequence of phases a school passes through and leaves behind, but as two modes a mature organisation learns to hold at once.



Understanding how to hold these two things in tension and ensure they are being given attention through the life cycle of the organisation is, perhaps, one of the greatest challenges for leaders – and boards – as they seek to establish and sustain an organisation that remains true to its vision. This is what I mean by stewardship.

The timescale problem

It's worth being precise about what stewardship is answering, because it isn't really a leadership virtue. Leadership is a question about capability - does this person have what it takes to keep the innovation alive? Stewardship is a question about time - what happens when the person who has what it takes is no longer there?



Every structure (e.g. leadership, governance, evaluation etc.) we currently use to support new schools is scaled to the term of whoever is in charge of it. A startup principal is given roughly half a decade to build something before the natural churn of the profession moves them on. A government invests political capital in a new school's founding for as long as it remains politically useful to do so - which is rarely longer than an electoral cycle. A board governs in three-year terms, and each new intake inherits a vision it did not build and may not fully understand. None of these are failures of commitment. They're simply timescales borrowed from elsewhere - from careers, from elections, from governance conventions - and none of them was designed with a generation in mind.

Kaitiakitanga

This is precisely the gap that te ao Māori has a word for that English doesn't: **kaitiakitanga**. Not ownership, and not management in the neutral, administrative sense - but the obligation to care for something on behalf of those who come after you, knowing you may never see it reach maturity yourself. A kaitiaki doesn't ask "*will this still be here on my watch?*" They ask "*will this still be here for the grandchildren of the people who aren't born yet?*" That's a genuinely different question, and it's the one our current structures for supporting school innovation don't know how to ask.

Which is why I don't think the answer to the timescale problem is simply better leaders, or even more trust, though the last two posts in this series argued both matter enormously. The answer has to be structural. If the person accountable for whether an innovation survives is always someone whose own tenure will end well before the answer is known, then survival can never be anyone's actual responsibility - it will always be the next person's problem, and the person after that, until eventually no one is holding it at all. Kaitiakitanga/Stewardship is what you build when you stop pretending any one leader, any one government, any one board term, can be trusted to carry something this slow on their own.

From commissioning to stewarding

Whether it's a greenfields school or an approved charter, governments and ministries invest heavily in getting a new school open - legislative frameworks, proposal assessment, governance appointments, funding, facilities. This commissioning role matters. It's what creates the conditions for a distinctive vision to exist at all. I'm very concerned about where we're at in NZ with this part of the process at the moment, where efficiency and short-termism seems to be the drivers for the way new schools are commissioned.

But once a school is open, it largely disappears into the mainstream system. The initial advantage of starting with small class sizes, large space, access to 'start-up' funding and specialist support give way to operating within the same funding mechanisms, same accountability frameworks, same review processes as every other school. The implicit assumption is that having been launched well, it will go on fulfilling its original promise unassisted. Nothing in the system is actually watching for whether it does.

That's the gap stewardship has to fill. Commissioning has processes, budgets, and named roles. Stewardship, in most systems I've seen, has none of these - it survives only for as long as an individual champion happens to care. I've been involved in enough of these new school startups to have experienced this first hand.

Call to action:

Recall the two clocks from the timescale problem above - the political and professional one, and the generational one a school's culture actually runs on. Closing that gap means action on both fronts:

If you're a system leader:

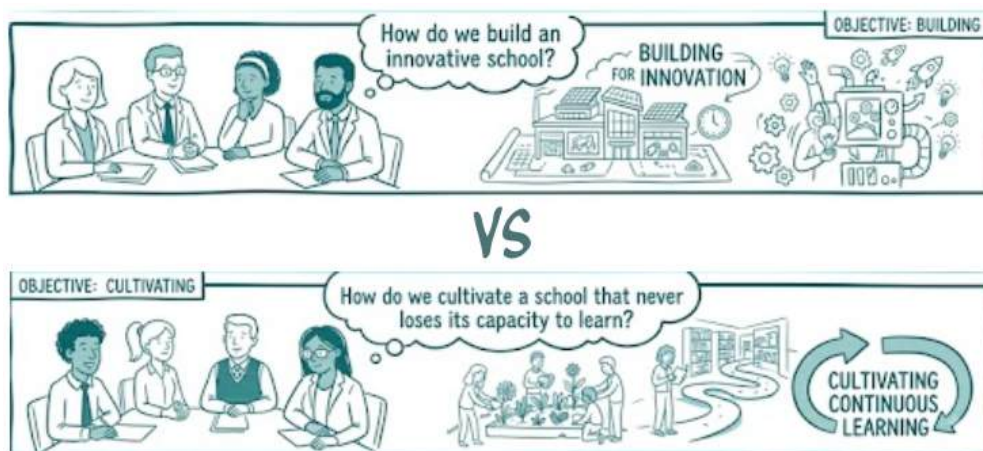
- Plan succession for vision, not just for personnel - treat the loss of institutional memory when a founding principal leaves as a system-level risk, not a school's private misfortune.
- Build the cross-school networks that let learning travel sideways, so it doesn't depend on any one person carrying it forward.
- Review these schools by a different question than the one you use for everyone else: not "has it stayed faithful to its founding model," but "is it still generating knowledge, still experimenting, still capable of a new response to a new challenge."

If you're a school or board leader:

- Put stewardship on the board's calendar. Make it a standing agenda item, not a crisis response.
- Find one practice your school has been defending rather than *examining*, and reopen it.
- Name - now, not when the founding principal announces they're leaving - who is responsible for keeping the *imagine if* question alive.

Both lists are really the same instruction, aimed at the two clocks named above. Both argue to stop treating stewardship as something that will happen if the right person stays long enough, and start building it as something that survives whoever's currently in the room.

Concluding Thoughts



Over the years I've become convinced that the ultimate measure of an innovative school is not the originality of its founding vision, nor the attractiveness of its buildings, nor even the success of its first few years.

It is whether, twenty years later, it still possesses the confidence, curiosity and collective capability to respond creatively to the challenges of its own time.

In a world where educational policy, technology and community expectations continue to evolve, perhaps the question for every school leader is no longer:

"How do we build an innovative school?"

but rather:

"How do we cultivate a school that never loses its capacity to learn?"

So here is what I would ask of educators, whether you are a board member, a principal, or someone shaping education policy. Don't wait for the five- or six-year mark to ask the question I have been circling throughout this piece. Ask it now, whatever phase your school is in.

If you are still dreaming or designing, build the capacity for renewal into the foundations. Write it into your vision documents not as an aspiration but as a discipline, and name, now, who will be responsible for keeping the question what if alive once the building is finished and the roll is full.

If you suspect your school has settled into protecting what it built, take the phase table back to your next board or leadership meeting and ask, honestly: are we still experimenting, or are we simply managing what we already made? Name one practice, routine or policy the school has been defending rather than examining, and put it up for genuine reconsideration.

And wherever you lead, go looking this week for one place where trust has quietly narrowed into compliance, one place where "we've always done it this way" has become the answer rather than the beginning of a question. Then ask what it would take to reopen it.

Challenge creates innovation. Success creates stability. Stability can become institutionalisation. Renewal restores the capacity to respond creatively. Learning organisations are organisations that make renewal a permanent capability.

Further Reading

If you've found some of the ideas and thinking in this paper useful you may find it helpful to explore some of the other thought pieces on the FutureMakers website that explore some of the issues related to growing schools as learning organisations, the leadership required and the vision that drives this.



Patterns of Reform Failure explores some of the key reasons behind our failure to introduce the change we set out to achieve, and includes a call to action that identifies a number of things that could become actions for anyone in the education system, including teachers, school leaders, and system leaders.

https://futuremakers.nz/thought-pieces/patterns_of_reform_failure-2/



Creating Futuremakers: Educators today face a confusing landscape of competing pedagogical approaches – each claiming to offer the answer to effective learning. This framework shows how these seemingly disparate approaches actually work together to support a unified vision: developing young people as future makers – humans equipped with the knowledge, capabilities, agency, and futures orientation needed to actively construct better possible worlds.

https://futuremakers.nz/thought-pieces/creating_futuremakers-2/



Five Pou for Future-Ready Education identifies five pou (pillars) that can help guide the design and development of education in Aotearoa New Zealand for the years ahead. Grounded in collaborative dialogue with educators and informed by both local context and global change, the paper offers a framework for thinking about what a future-ready education system might look like.

<https://futuremakers.nz/thought-pieces/five-pou-future-education/>



Future-ready capabilities presents a new framework that emerged from the conversations of a group of educators, researchers and business leaders at the EdRising event held in Auckland in July, 2026. It comes from a starting point that is uniquely Aotearoa-New Zealand. Rather than adapting an international model, it was built from the ground up by people who brought their own professional knowledge and cultural contexts to the task.

<https://futuremakers.nz/thought-pieces/future-ready-capabilities/>

Access the full suite of thought pieces on the FutureMakers website:

[\(https://futuremakers.nz/thought-pieces/\)](https://futuremakers.nz/thought-pieces/)

Please Donate

The FutureMakers thought pieces are provided without cost as a service to educators seeking to make a difference. This work is sustained through the generous support of readers who find value in what is being shared. If you've found this document helpful and would like to support the development of future papers I invite you to make a donation to support this work:

<https://futuremakers.nz/donations/>