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A Look at Sustainability and Vulnerability in School Reform

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A Look at Sustainability and Vulnerability in School Reform

Abstract

This qualitative study sought stakeholder perspectives on the Kansas Department of Education's "Kansas Can" school redesign initiatives. Interviews with stakeholders revealed both sustainable and vulnerable aspects of the school reforms across cultural, political, and technological dimensions.

Keywords

School Reform, School Redesign

A Look at Sustainability and Vulnerability in School Reform

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Introduction

Between 2015 and 2020, KSDE implemented the "Kansas Can" redesign effort to rethink education for Kansas students and emphasize strategies leading to success for all students (Neuenswander, 2020; Corsi, 2020, Watson, 2020). Five outcomes were identified: social-emotional skills, kindergarten readiness, individual plans of study, graduation rates, and post-secondary success (KSDE, 2018; Blad, 2017). Districts addressed these outcomes in redesigning schools after a supportive faculty vote, 1 year of planning, and consultation provided by KSDE but without additional funding (Hancock, 2022, Clay, 2020). Principles guiding the redesign efforts included student success skills, community partnerships, real-world applications, and personalized learning. During the five years of implementation, 80 school districts across Kansas were selected, provided with consultant support, and engaged in the redesign efforts.

In their analysis of school reform, Earnest House and Patrick McQuillan (2005) suggest that school reform efforts should address three perspectives (*technological, political, and cultural*). They acknowledge that many school reform efforts often emphasize only one of these three perspectives and that this limits the efficacy and sustainability of the reform.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the sustainability and vulnerability of the Kansas State Department of Education's "Kansas Can" school redesign efforts by exploring stakeholders' perceptions about the successes and challenges they faced while engaging in school reform. Stakeholders included in this study are administrators, parents, board members, and community members. This study examines stakeholder's stories of their school redesign efforts through the lens of three perspectives (House & McQuillan, 2025). By examining the focus and implementation of specific "Kansas Can" school redesign efforts, this research grounds those efforts in House and McQuillan's framework of ideas central to understanding successful and sustainable school reform.

For purposes of this study sustainability in reform efforts are defined as those actions interviewees perceive as leading to unanimity, continuity, and positive system outcomes.

Vulnerabilities are defined as those actions that interviewees perceive as contributing to division, discontinuations, or negative system outcomes.

Literature Review

Change is inherent to education. Whether under the guise of school-wide improvements or outright educational reforms, the field of education is in constant movement. This state of irritability allows education to be responsive to the needs of students (Corsi, 2020). Some might argue that this sense of change and disruption is a crucial element for school reform initiatives and can be characterized as either positive or negative. Indeed, the ways in which a school or district navigates the forces of change can impact the end result in ways that also influence the generation of adaptive change, its long-term sustainability, and acceptance by the larger community of stakeholders (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016). “Sustainable development respects, protects, preserves, and renews all that is valuable in the past and learns from it in order to build a better future (Hargreaves, 2007, p. 226).

School reform in the U.S has a long and complex history, with efforts most often focused on improving quality, accessibility, and long-term outcomes for students. Often success is measured through metrics like graduation rates, standardized assessments, and by percentages of students who go on to post-secondary education, but it is becoming increasingly desirable to consider measures such as school climate, student engagement, student safety, rates of chronic absenteeism, and “whole-child” factors. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) required states to incorporate one of these as an “other indicator” as part of their accountability measures (Blad, 2016, para 5 - 7).

It is natural to want to find a one size fits all solution to improving schools. Understanding whether a particular reform will translate to a formula for improved outcomes is difficult, particularly because a reform that works for one school does not always work for another. Mazzeo, Fleischman, Heppen, & Jahangir (2016) acknowledge that due to the complexities of the *why* regarding low school performance, there is no one improvement model that can be implemented for success in all schools. What impacts reform the most are the personal factors of that school, the community, and the organization.

House and McQuillan (2005) posit that successful school reform can only be obtained by understanding and focusing on three domains of reform: technological, political, and cultural. Each domain can be thought of as stemming from a particular theoretical tradition. The technological perspective draws on the field of economics and the metaphor of production. These are reform efforts that focus on the mechanics of reform, considering aspects like technological changes, instructional improvements, program assessment, and/or incentivizing performance. The political domain draws on political science as its parent theory and uses a metaphor of negotiation and competing interests. The political domain hinges on the legitimacy of power/authority, the use of that power and authority, and persuasion or inducement. Finally, the cultural domain draws on a tradition of anthropology and invokes a metaphor of community. Shared values and meaning, social relationships, autonomy, and integrity are the hallmarks of this perspective (House and McQuillan, 2005).

It may take a complex interaction of all three perspectives in order to implement successful school reform, but many reform efforts focus on only one of the three perspectives (House & McQuillan, 2005), and this may lead to the overall failure of the reform. Multiple reports on reform never come to a consensus about whether their efforts were successful. However, it is worth noting that viewing reforms as either successes or failures does not understand the nature of education (Corsi, 2020). In many cases, reform efforts are distilled down to student proficiency, as defined solely by test scores (Brezicha, Bergmark, & Mitra, 2015), a view that perpetuates the tendency to boil down school reform efforts to a single outcome, ignoring the interaction of multiple complex processes that effective reform efforts require.

According to Greene & McShane (2018) “American education is littered with failed reforms” (p. 46), and much of this is due to opposing viewpoints, especially related to what constitutes success, what needs to change, and how reforms will impact long-term prospects for students. Failure may simply be part of attempting reform, but there needs to be a focus on acknowledging and learning from mistakes made. Greene & McShane (2018) surveyed teachers at a conference asking the teachers to write about a failed reform and found a theme that these educators felt that education cannot escape the political factors that influence it and accepting this will help schools and districts advance.

Another recurring theme of school reform is that it is not uniform. It must be directly molded to the school situation. This may be due to the many moving parts in any given school and addressing different cultural, political, and technical environments. Many school redesign plans argue for small schools as the best way to make new plans stick and be able to deploy things like individualized plans for every student. These smaller cohorts in schools and class sizes allow teachers and principals to better know their students (Reigeluth & Karnopp, 2020). However, as Schneider (2014) argued, the small school movement ultimately failed to deliver all of the promised benefits not because of the potential of the idea itself, but in the shortcomings of implementing the reform within the complex ecosystems of schools.

Kaniuka (2012) reminds us that “School reform is not performed in isolation; rather the context in which it occurs must be considered as to how it influences the implementation and ultimate success of the reform.” (p. 327).

Conceptual Framework

In considering a school reform effort with as broad of intentions as the Kansans Can Redesign, there is a need to think more expansively in terms of evaluating its impact. Not only does the Redesign represent many changes to the structures and practices of schooling, there are many variables involved. Ultimately, efficiency or efficacy models such as those used in business settings or even the “value-added” measures of the No Child Left Behind era (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2014) could fail to account for the large number of variables that impact if the changes during the Redesign are effective and sustainable. Furthermore, these types of evaluation measures can only account for particular types of outcomes, specifically quantifiable academic outcomes. As has been highlighted during and moving forward from the Covid-19 pandemic, the roles schools play in communities extend well beyond these types of outcomes (Gottlieb & Schneider, 2020).

Eisner (1992) argued that in his ecology of schooling, a change in one dimension of the ecology required adequate momentum to resist the impacts of the others, or it would revert. For example, a change to the intentional dimension would need momentum to overcome the impacts of the structural, evaluative, and curricular dimensions, otherwise the intentions of the school would revert back to what they were before. However, the Redesign represents a complexity that extends beyond that for which Eisner's ecology can account. Changes in the Redesign were across most if not all dimensions, many changes occurred at once, and the changes were not limited to the confines of an individual school as they extended to include entire districts and communities.

In considering Eisner's argument for the momentum necessary for a change to be sustainable, it is necessary to approach viewing the Redesign not with a single evaluative mechanism, such as looking for particular academic outcomes. Rather, there is a pressing need to have a range of lenses to evaluate the successes, failures, and sustainability of the Redesign.

In light of these complexities, the House and McQuillin (2005) make a compelling argument for using three lenses: the technological, political, and cultural. Each of these lenses introduces ways of not only considering if a school reform is successful, but more importantly provides an opportunity to consider the experiences of the various stakeholders within school systems. The opportunity is to not just label a school reform as categorically successful or unsuccessful, but to ask the more nuanced questions of "In what ways did this reform succeed or not?" and "For whom did this reform succeed?" From this perspective, the aim of this study is not to categorically label the Redesign successful or not, but rather to use three lenses to highlight the nuance and complexities of such vast changes within schools with many varied stakeholders.

Research Methods

Initial Conceptualization

Initial conceptualization for this study began with a meeting that included researchers and KSDE Redesign staff in June of 2021. At that time, there was little evidence available about the success of the various school districts that had participated in redesign, including what goals they had set for the redesign process, what metrics had been used as outcome indicators, and/or what review processes had been put in place. Initial implementation discussions included concerns staff expressed about program review, potential participants for the study, and use of the conceptual framework based on House and McQuillan's (2005) three aspects of school reform. In August of the same year, a rough draft of potential interview questions had been developed and was reviewed by redesign staff at KSDE.

This review was followed by use of a Lawshe content evaluation panel in September of 2021 before the interview protocol was finalized. A panel was formed from a group of seven colleagues with expertise in both school reform and qualitative methodology. This process of expert review can help to assure a degree of content validity, which can also be defined as the ability of the selected items to reflect the variables of the construct in the measure (Gilbert & Prion, 2016; Zamanzadeh et al., 2015).

Recommendations for expert panels include the use of between five and ten people, drawn from a variety of perspectives, and all with related domain knowledge (Gilbert & Prion, 2016). Each member of the panel was provided with a brief description of the three aspects of reform based on House and McQuillan's (2005) framework and the related questions for each of the aspects. Then, for each question, reviewers were asked to rate the degree to which the question reflected variables that make up the three constructs, using the following scale: essential, useful (but not essential), or not necessary for understanding the school redesign. When reviewers indicated "Useful (but not essential)" or "Not necessary", they were asked to explain their rationale for those ratings in the follow-up question. Where reviewers displayed unanimous agreement (4 out of 13 questions), items were left in the interview protocol. Where there was disagreement (9 out of 13 questions), investigators used comments to either edit questions based on feedback, consolidate repetitive items, or remove them altogether. This resulted in a final interview protocol that included nine questions related to the three aspects of school reform, and an additional six questions that allowed for a scaling question to be added, along with questions that might be used as follow-up or to probe more deeply about the redesign process.

Data Collection

From October of 2021 through February of 2022, 17 interviews were conducted by three principal investigators through Zoom teleconference technologies. Interviews were secured by contacting the initial contact recommendations from KSDE Redesign consultants and then expanding to others using a modified snowball approach by asking interviewees to reach out to other relevant members of the school or district community. Efforts by PIs yielded a mix of interviewees that included teachers, administrators, school board members, and parents and community members. During the early spring of 2021 the interviews were transcribed, organized and uploaded into Dedoose software for analysis. Table 1 below shows the stakeholder representation by position.

Table 1: Stakeholder representation by groups

Stakeholder group	N
Administrators	8
School Board member	2
Community member	2
Teachers	4
Parents	1

Coding and Analysis

Coding was conducted through independent sweeps of the interview data by the researchers with intermittent discussions about the process to promote reliability. During the coding process the themes were independent of one other and not nested in a way that allows summation of subcategories.

Eighty-seven themes represented the technological dimension along with subthemes representing concepts from the House and McQuillan (2005) framework such as *knowledge of technique*, *cooperation*, *efficiency*, *innovation*, *common interests and values*, *production*, *systematic and rational processes*, and *technique and outcomes*. Major open coding concepts emerging from the data were *project-based learning*, *social emotional learning*, *standards-based grading*, *test scores/data as product*, *professional development*, *daily schedules*, *faculty retention/success*, *grading/evaluation structures*, and *personalized learning*.

Eighty-six themes represented the cultural dimension along with subthemes representing concepts from the House and McQuillan (2005) framework such as *community*, *meaning and values*, *change in values*, *conflict over values*, and *autonomy*. Major open coding concepts emerging from the data were *gaining community buy-in*, *sustainability* and *trust*.

One hundred and ten themes represented the political dimension along with subthemes representing concepts from the House and McQuillan (2005) framework such as *negotiation*, *persuasion / inducement* and *innovation in context*, *legitimacy*, and *cooperation*. Major open coding concepts emerging from the data were *sustainability of faculty*, *teacher reticence*, *taking small steps*, *cultivating community support*, *cultivating parent support*, *cultivating student support*, *cultivating teacher buy-in*, and *school board support*.

Results

Results are organized by interview excerpt codes suggesting themes in the data recognized by the research team. Initial coding used the three broad themes (*technological*, *cultural*, *political*) from House and McQuillan (2005). Next data was coded by the subthemes from House and McQuillan (2005). Coding was subsequently expanded using open themes emerging from the data. Initial and emerging themes are listed in Tables 2-7 below. Each table is organized into code Application (number of times code was applied across the entire data set) and Presence (number of interviewed participants with excerpts coded with that specific code).

Table 2: Themes in the Technological Dimension (from House & McQuillan, 2005)

Code		Application	Presence
Technological Dimension		87	14
	Knowledge of Technique	35	9
	Cooperation	9	4
	Efficiency	7	4
	Innovation	12	4
	Common Interests / Values	8	2
	Production	21	8
	Systematic Rational Process	6	3

	Technique and Outcomes	66	14
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Table 3: Themes in the Cultural Dimension (from House &McQuillan, 2005)

Code		Application	Presence
Cultural Dimension		86	13
	Community	4	2
	Interaction of Cultures		
	Change of Values	2	1
	Meaning and Values	4	4
	Conflict Over Values	10	4
	Cooperation		
	Context		
	Autonomy	2	2

Table 4: Themes in the Political Dimension (from House &McQuillan, 2005)

Code		Application	Presence
Political Dimension		110	14
	Negotiation	3	2
	Group Conflict / Compromise		
	Persuasion / Inducement	18	2
	Power and Authority		
	Conflict Over Interests		
	Cooperation	9	2
	Innovation in Context	7	2
	Legitimacy	2	1

Table 5: Additional Themes in the Technological Dimension

Code	Application	Presence
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Technological Dimension			
	Post Secondary Success	3	1
	Expertise	5	3
	Individualized Plans of Study / Personalized Learning	7	3
	Project-based Learning	13	8
	Social-emotional Learning	15	6
	Standards-based Grading	9	3
	Choice	6	3
	Easiness	4	3
	Energy/Time Investment	1	1
	New/Cutting Edge	5	4
	Gained Knowledge Through Experience	4	2
	KSDE Staff Support	6	4
	Mentoring	3	1
	Professional Development	10	7
	Research	8	3
	Lack of Follow-through	6	3
	Test Scores/Data as Product	18	8
	Daily Schedules	12	7
	Faculty Retention/Success	10	5
	Grading/Evaluation Structures	10	4
	Graduation Rate	1	1
	Personalized Learning	23	10
	Responding to Challenges	5	4

Table 6: Additional Themes in the Cultural Dimension

Code		Application	Presence
Cultural Dimension			

	Gaining Community Buy In	11	4
	Social Belonging	1	1
	Sustainability	17	4
	Teacher Resistance	2	1
	Trust	8	4

Table 7: Additional Themes in the Political Dimension

Code		Application	Presence
Political Dimension			
	Lack of Parent Feedback	1	1
	Sustainability of Faculty	5	2
	Teacher Reticence	5	3
	Small Steps	3	2
	Invited but not Forced	2	2
	Cultivating Community Support	11	3
	Cultivating Parent Support	5	3
	Cultivating Student Support	3	3
	Cultivating Teacher Buy-in	14	3
	Opportunity to Fail	1	1
	Parental Support	2	2
	School Board Support	3	3

Technological Dimension

From the technological lens of school reform, two themes emerged with a high frequency (*knowledge of technique and technique and outcomes*). Concepts emerging from the open coding process included *project-based learning, social emotional learning, professional development, test scores / data as product, daily schedules, faculty retention / success, grading / evaluation structures, and personalized learning*. Systems that reached consensus on smaller or school-within-a school reforms that centered upon authentic and applicable learning outcomes responded more frequently in positive terms about the reform efforts. Elements reported as vulnerabilities by interviewees centered on scaling up the knowledge, techniques and commitment to targeted outcomes across professional faculty and the community.

Sustainability: “So this student built a guitar and through building that guitar and working with this teacher, the student was able to meet five of those standards through her project” (administrator)

Vulnerability: “So I think we sacrificed instruction and learning as this was being implemented because so much time and effort was put into trying to do too much too quick. You know, too many new things, staff wasn't educated, staff wasn't prepared. So I think our kids did suffer, from the instructional side. That and our terribly low test scores is concerning.” (community member)

Vulnerability: “At the junior senior high school we basically made three big changes, and the first one was to transition from a traditional eight hour, I think it was eight hours a day. I'm pretty sure, eight hour a day schedule to a FLEX MOD schedule um, and then we adopted Summit Learning (in grades) seven through nine and we implemented PPL Academy in grades 10 through 12. So those were the three big things that we did.” (teacher)

Sustainability: “I've, I've done administration for eight years, and this is the hardest thing I've ever done. Year two got a little bit better, but lots of, lots of tears, still lots of hiccups. And then we just kind of figured it out. We figured it out last year and even with COVID and everything that our district and building handled with COVID we have seen a huge increase in assessment scores, a huge increase in our, our district data that we take on students, a major, major decrease in behaviors. And our staff is a completely different staff. If you walked in the building today and you saw them four years ago, you would not think it is the same group of teachers that work together.” (administrator)

Cultural Dimension

Conflict over values emerged as the most frequent code within the cultural dimension. *Sustainability, trust, and gaining community buy-in* were the most common themes emerging from the open-coding process. The interviews uncovered discrepancies between stakeholders' priorities and views that were either addressed proactively by the redesign plan or resulted in significant decay of efficacy and sustainability. Sustainable efforts were represented by efforts that were aligned with community values. Vulnerabilities were exhibited by moving too rapidly and a lack of attention to building consensus with the larger community.

Sustainability: “I mean, your school is your heart or your community. They've got your largest asset, our students. If we are all not working towards investing in those assets of our students, it's not going to ever work. And so, I do think that change is hard. Let's make sure the change is for the best for our students. And I think that's what we have to focus on.” (community member)

Vulnerability: “not truly understanding what we were trying to do and even some of the agriculture community in like problem solving.”

“...we really stepped back and looked at the values, ...what do our students need and value? ... the values of our community. And so, we started prioritizing and finding common ground and all those different values. (teacher)

Vulnerability: “I don't think that they (the community) I think in the beginning, they were like okay yeah this will be cool they'll do some fun stuff, it'll be awesome, whatever. And then when they realize how it was really ratcheting up the accountability, I mean like it was getting harder for their kids and things were really changing. (In the community's view) this was not normal school as they remembered it. I don't think they really wanted it. (teacher)

Vulnerability: “I don't know that our society, that our communities are ready to for the changes that need to happen in our schools. And I don't even necessarily know what they are. I'm just saying I think people want school to be what school was for them and I don't think that's going to cut it. I think teachers are tired, I kids are not you know we keep raising the bar and they're not doing any better than they were 20 years ago so it's like what something's got to give here.” (teacher)

Sustainability: “And we really more than anything worked on staff culture. And we did a lot of team building. Um, if I got 30 minutes alone with my staff, we were doing a team building activity. And we, this building, I would say it took us about two years. The first year was rough. We had a lot of tears, a lot of frustrations, a lot of people thinking is this job for me, including me. I have to admit, I thought this is a tough gig.” (Administrator)

Political Dimension

Within the political dimension, *persuasion/inducement*, *cooperation*, and *innovation in context* were the most frequently coded themes. *Cultivating teacher support* and *cultivating community buy-in* were the two most common themes emerging from the open-coding process. Efforts described as more sustainable exhibited consensus building and choice. Efforts described as vulnerable left behind segments of the stakeholders and struggled with scalability.

Sustainability: “...our redesign has looked like a series of programs that we've been implementing to give students options. So, they can still be in these traditional classrooms and teachers can still teach in the way that they've been doing. And then those of us who want to continue developing new ways of reaching kids can...” (administrator)

Vulnerability: “...I think we did have some holdouts in our staff that never came around the bend. And I don't I don't think they did us any favors, I think, in the end, those community members that were the force behind a lot of us leaving...”

“...I also wonder a little bit if people didn't really engage until all of a sudden, they didn't like something...” (teacher)

Vulnerability: “... for me, we had a huge conversation or a really big debate about our grading policy. And so we were all doing all this research about you know, should we

accept late work forever, should we give them a percentage off per day and like I was reading and everything I was reading was basically telling me if you want them to learn, then you should let them turn it in until the last second for full credit, because you need to emphasize the learning. But everybody else in that room was going nope. If they don't turn it in on time they shouldn't get any credit, we need to hold them accountable blah blah blah. And I said, my piece, and they said their piece, and we voted, and I lost, and so I had to get on board.” (teacher)

Vulnerability: “I think those the people sitting on the board, I think they were sold on it, but I think when their neighbors came knocking with torches, they didn't want it, that bad anymore. And that's fair. I mean you know I get that. But I also think a little bit I felt like they kind of led us to the cliff and said oh yeah, we're gonna jump with you and we all jumped and then they stood up there and waved and then it's like Oh well, sorry that you did that, even though I told you to. Which is okay. I'm glad I jumped. But here we are, you know.” (teacher)

Sustainability: “But now the district wide, we are using some of those tools district wide. We increased our expectations for what curriculum and instruction looks like, what materials the teachers are mandated to use. We beefed up our professional development by making sure teachers were getting trained in all of these things we're asking them to do. Do they have the proper training, and do they feel supported in that role?” (Administrator)

Conclusions

Data from the study revealed that stakeholders were aware of all three dimensions but that the technological dimension was often emphasized, while inadequate attention to political and cultural dimensions were often problematic during the implementation process. Administrators and faculty were often so focused on difficulties associated with implementing the technical changes, that the cultural landscape and political capital necessary to sustain those changes became gaps that were inadvertently left unaddressed.

The interview data revealed several aspects of sustainable and vulnerable school reform efforts. Interviewees described sustainable models of school reform that exhibited implementation in smaller chunks, allowance for teacher and student choice, involvement with the community, rich communications across stakeholders, reaching consensus on innovations, and more of a focus on authentic and applicable learning.

Those reporting more vulnerable models of reform described less staffing choice, misalignments with community culture and values, changing too much at once, and focusing on school structural changes (such as grading or schedules), while not considering complicating factors across the three dimensions.

Schools will always change and undergo reform and redesign. It is important that practitioners and researchers understand and robustly address all three dimensions. (technological, political, and cultural) of school reform if such efforts are to be efficacious and sustainable.

Finally, it is noteworthy that KSDE has moved away from calling this “School Redesign” and towards a continuous improvement process, embedded in the ubiquitous school accreditation process. Beginning in 2020, the Kansas Can Redesign effort was merged with the Kansas Educational Systems Accreditation process in which all school districts participate (KSDE, 2023). Under this new packaging (Kansas School Improvement Model) schools currently work on four areas of continuous improvement: Structured Literacy, Standards Alignment, Balanced Assessment, and Quality Instruction (KSDE, 2025). In the new school improvement process, some of the legacy of the Kansas Can Redesign efforts can still be found but more deeply imbedded and integrated. Perhaps this helps to take the emphasis off the cultural and political connotations of the word “redesign” and casts innovation in a more natural and nuanced light.

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