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Avoiding Initiative Fatigue in School Responder Model Implementation

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INTRODUCTION: A school responder model (SRM) is a framework that serves to establish new pathways to behavioral health supports for students who are struggling with problematic behavior in school due to mental health conditions, substance abuse or trauma.¹ There are many challenges that can complicate the successful development and implementation of the SRM. This brief will focus on the problem of “initiative fatigue” or instances where organizations take on too many change efforts or engage in persistent change efforts over a sustained period. Consequences of initiative fatigue are profound—precipitating turnover and undermining organizational change.

The SRM requires cross-systems collaboration between a team of stakeholders including educators, community-based behavioral health providers, law enforcement officers, families, and youth. However, because the SRM is centered and implemented within the school, the greatest demands for change tend to fall on school administrators, educators, and other school-based staff. Therefore, the capacity of schools to create, implement and sustain the SRM, is critical to its success.

Initiative fatigue or more commonly in educational settings, “school reform fatigue,” is one barrier that schools may encounter, which diminishes the capacity necessary to effectively execute the SRM. Referred to by a variety of terms within organizational change and school improvement literature, “initiative fatigue,”² “change fatigue,”³ “reform fatigue,”⁴ or “repetitive change syndrome,”⁵ can occur when schools opt to or are required by policy reforms to take on too many change efforts at once or to engage in persistent cycles of change. This brief will use the term initiative fatigue and provide the following:

- Overview of initiative fatigue and its resulting consequences as discussed in the broader organizational change literature.
- Unique features of initiative fatigue in school settings and its implications.
- Strategies to overcome these challenges when developing and implementing the SRM.

Initiative Fatigue and Organizational Change

In his book, *Change Without Pain*, Eric Abrahamson defined “repetitive-change syndrome” in businesses as the confluence of initiative overload, change-related chaos, and widespread employee anxiety, cynicism, and burnout.⁶ According to Abrahamson, initiative overload occurs when an organization engages in more change processes than any person can reasonably handle. At some point, when many initiatives have been launched, people no longer know which change they are implementing or why. This is change-related chaos. Consequently, employees become resistant to change as they are overwhelmed, hardened to the “come-and-go” nature of change initiatives, and weary as new initiatives are viewed with the anticipation of failure. Abrahamson argues that only new employees (without this history with change initiatives in the organization) and senior managers (often distant from the impacts of these initiatives) end up enthusiastic about new change initiatives.

Other experts have found that a high level of change in an organization can run counter to an employee’s intrinsic need for predictability and order,⁷ and can cause employees to feel stress and exhaustion as a result. The experience of change fatigue is correlated with decreased organizational commitment and increased employee turnover. These relationships are mediated by the employee’s exhaustion.⁸ Other research into organizational change reveals that organizations must balance change and stability and emphasizes the need to implement change in a manner that continues to allow for daily operations.⁹

Initiative Fatigue in Schools

In 2010, Reeves described the “the law of initiative fatigue” in school settings as the state

“...when the number of initiatives increases while time, resources, and emotional energy are constant, then each new initiative—no matter how well conceived or well intentioned—will receive fewer minutes, dollars, and ounces of emotional energy than its predecessors.”¹⁰

For schools, initiative fatigue or school reform fatigue is increasingly common in the age of accountability-based and compliance-oriented mandates that have been popular policy approaches with federal and state governments.¹¹ The school accountability movement interjected “results-based incentive systems in K-12 education.”¹²

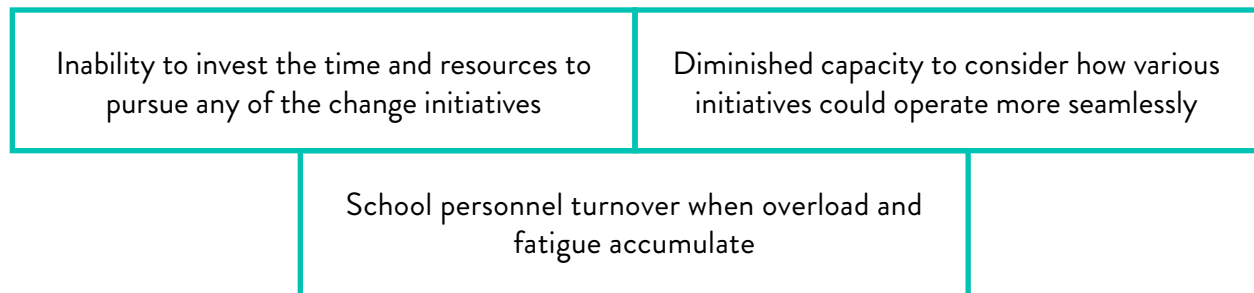
In the United States, school accountability has largely focused on student testing with the most notable legislation being No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002,¹³ though accountability-based tools have remained popular through present day. Overloaded educators are a common byproduct of the emphasis on school improvement.¹⁴ Multiple initiatives are pursued simultaneously and in succession to try and move the needle on student achievement.¹⁵

Further, schools face problems that are pressing and compelling, the implications of which impact young people and their families. As a result, administrators and educators rightly move quickly to solve these problems with policy and programmatic changes, often before fully understanding the nature of the problem or appreciating its intricacies. The pressure to react—both externally and internally—can entice well-meaning educators into a constant state of “solutionitis.”¹⁶

“SOLUTIONITIS”
When solutionitis occurs, administrators and educators may find themselves cycling through multiple initiatives and reforms, experiencing little success along the way, further contributing to the feeling of overload and burnout.

The result of these pressures are overload, when there are too many initiatives, and fragmentation, when initiatives are disconnected from one another.¹⁷ The roots of fragmentation also go back decades as evidenced by the term “Christmas Tree Schools” coined in the early 1990s by the Consortium on Chicago School Research. The “Christmas Tree School” described the ways in which schools represented the disconnected group of initiatives within schools, collected over time to address different issues or problems.¹⁸

Research indicates an inverse relationship between the number of priorities in a school and the long-term effectiveness of those initiatives.¹⁹ A study focused on the implementation of multiple initiatives in one school district identified the consequences of implementing multiple initiatives at one time.²⁰ These included:



Some researchers are critical of the recent trend toward continuous and substantial change in education. Ravitch noted that countries with successful school systems do not generally engage in constant reform and argued that continuous school reorganization done outside of a focus on the school’s central purpose will not lead to school improvement.²¹ Researchers who analyzed continuous curriculum changes in Australia came to the conclusion that change fatigue was “a silent killer of mandated curriculum reform and needs to be seriously considered in any examination of teacher perceptions of, and experiences with, change management, job satisfaction and burnout.”²²

Further, Fullan and Quinn argue that what is lost amidst the crush of repeated and sustained initiative implementation is coherence.²³ Initiatives are not only too numerous (overload), but also disconnected (fragmented). The most successful school leaders are ones that help their schools focus with coherence or with a shared understanding about the nature of their work. According to Fullan and Quinn, coherence is cumulative and ongoing as it is built within the minds of those within the school.

To build coherence, Fullan and Quinn identify four components. First, focusing direction, or building a collective purpose, which is directly undermined by having too many unconnected and changing initiatives. Focusing on two or three goals is suggested, as Fullan and Quinn advocate for a “reduce, reframe, remove” strategy to ongoing initiatives. Second, cultivating collaborative cultures where it is “okay” to fail or make mistakes in the pursuit of learning. The group is therefore focused on building expertise and directed at a common purpose. Third, avoiding solutionitis or the quick fixes by deepening learning. Here communities of inquiry are organized to study practices and impacts. Finally, emphasizing internal rather than external accountability. Fullan and Quinn argue for the group to take “self and collective responsibility,” which is reinforced by external accountability, but not driven by it.

Building Coherence

- 1.) Focusing direction/building a collective purpose. Only focus on 2 or 3 goals.
- 2.) Cultivating collaborative cultures where it is “okay” to fail or make mistakes.
- 3.) Avoiding solutionitis or the quick fixes by deepening learning.
- 4.) Emphasizing internal rather than external accountability.

Recommendations for Implementing the School Responder Model to Avoid Initiative Fatigue

School administrators and educators who believe the SRM address key challenges in their school, should consider the broader picture of how the SRM fits into initiatives across the school. The following recommendations are offered to build coherence, though they are not unique to the SRM.

1. Start with Deeply Understanding the “Problems” Using Participatory Approaches:

One of the contributing factors to initiative fatigue is the tendency to engage in solutionitis, which often results from a failure to truly understand the nature of the problem, from the perspective of all stakeholders, that an initiative is trying to address. Bryk, Gomez and Grunrow recommend starting with a single question, “what specifically is the problem we are trying to solve?”²⁴ The focus should be problem-specific and user-centered and engages participants early and often in defining not only a problem of practice that would bring a school to the SRM, but all priorities across the school. Collectively identifying priorities facilitates early buy-in among educators doing the implementing, the deep learning advocated by Bryk, Gomez and Grunrow, and the coherence building advocated for by Fullan and Quinn.



Research indicates that staff participation in decision-making, the development of collegial institutional culture, and teacher learning opportunities that include time to process learning all foster school capacity to implement change.²⁵ Arriving at the SRM process when there is consensus across the school—and built on a range of diverse perspectives²⁶—that behavioral health concerns should be a priority of focus, is a powerful place to start from.

2. Attend to the Emotional Nature of the Change Process:



Initiatives intended to bring about change within a school can trigger a range of reactions from those working within that system. Educators are being asked to do their work in different ways and forgo aspects of a system for which they may have professional or emotional investment. Unpacking the ways in which educators within a school have vested interests in the current system can facilitate modifications (as appropriate) or aid in the process of building the emotional scaffolding to bring educators through the change process.²⁷

3. Consider How the SRM Is Consistent with the Existing Organizational Focus:

Some research indicates schools are more successful implementing change when new initiatives build on previous initiatives rather than presenting new efforts as discontinuous ideas.²⁸ This helps to build connection and avoid fragmentation. In addition, organizational change literature dictates that all organizations need something stable and unchanging to bind an organization together, guide employee behavior, and maintain employee motivation.²⁹



Mapping commonalities across a new initiative and an existing structure or previous initiative can support this sense of stable, continuous efforts. For example, researchers have identified commonalities between comprehensive school counseling programs and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and comprehensive school counseling programs and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Comprehensive school counseling programs and PBIS both include whole-school prevention efforts and more specialized services for students with higher

needs, use of evidence-based practices (EBPs), data-driven frameworks that use both school and student data, and culturally responsive approaches.³⁰ Comprehensive school counseling programs and MTSS have these same commonalities and they both also use a leadership team to guide program design and implementation and focus on collaboration and coordinated services.³¹ New efforts to develop comprehensive school counseling programs could therefore build on existing PBIS or MTSS structures instead of presenting those efforts as something new that is different from and on top of an existing PBIS or MTSS structure.

The SRM can be created by building on existing structures in much the same way. Groups that are planning the SRM should consider how the SRM might connect with existing efforts within the school. This may include existing school safety efforts, school threat assessment structures, school-based health centers, school discipline reform efforts, and school-justice partnership work.

4. Consider the Number of and Nature of Ongoing Initiatives Before Committing to Developing the SRM:



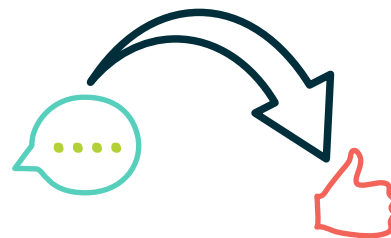
Research indicates that large scale improvements in student achievement are most likely to occur when only a few initiatives are implemented deeply.³² In addition, schools have been shown to function better when a manageable number of priorities are addressed.³³

It is therefore important to take honest stock of the number of initiatives in a school before beginning the SRM. If development and implementation of the SRM can fit as one of a limited number of priorities, then the time for the SRM work may be ripe. However, if the school is already implementing several initiatives then it may be prudent to postpone SRM work until it can be one of a small number of changes. Taking stock of initiatives can also include exploring whether any additional efforts are well-aligned with the SRM approach. Initiatives such as Restorative Justice and Trauma-Informed Schools are very much in alignment with SRMs, while an existing initiative that centers around an intense curriculum improvement effort, for example, may not be as easily integrated. Not only then is consideration of the number of ongoing initiatives essential, but considering the nature of those initiatives is also beneficial.

Further, as recommended by Fullan and Quinn, consideration for how the SRM connects to the other initiatives is key or there is risk of fragmentation, which is known to exacerbate fatigue. Leaders who are considering SRM work may want to take stock of existing signs of initiative fatigue in the school, such as staff exhaustion with change and turnover, in coming to this determination.

5. Frame SRM Efforts as Reorganization of Existing Resources Instead of Developing Completely New Structures:

The core of any SRM is the development of new pathways to community-based behavioral health resources for students who struggle with behavior in school because of a mental health need. It is about making time and space for schools, law enforcement, providers, and families and youth to come together to plan new pathways to existing resources.



This understanding of the SRM falls in line with recommendations in the organizational change literature to resist creating from scratch. Abrahamson outlines how businesses should engage

in “creative recombination” as a better way to change.³⁴ According to Abrahamson, this involves recombining existing organizational assets in creative ways that are new and successful.

Others have recommended “routinizing” to counter change fatigue.³⁵ Routinizing involves using structures and processes that are already in place or institutionalizing structures and processes that can be used across multiple change processes. Routines serve to reduce the number of new things people need to grasp, foster trust between staff and managers through their predictability, and build connections between people that create social support and build understanding about the change.³⁶

These concepts can be the foundation of SRM work in several ways. For example, many schools have an existing focus on school safety. There may be an existing committee within the school that is working on advancing school safety. It may be possible to embed SRM efforts within the existing structure for school safety efforts. Perhaps the school has an existing school-based health center. SRM efforts could focus on enhancing the connection between school discipline and mental health supports at that center. Or maybe the school and the juvenile justice system are already working on reducing school-based referrals to juvenile court for low-level incidents at the school. SRM development could be embedded into the structures already in place to address that issue.

The capacity to use existing resources in new and creative ways and to build on existing structures will vary by community. It will depend on what resources and structures are already in place. The key is to consider what these existing resources and structures are at the outset of any SRM work so SRM efforts do not overwhelm school personnel in a manner that results in initiative fatigue.

6. Participatory Process Should Continue through Implementation:



The cross-systems team that comes together to develop the SRM should include representation from school staff. Because any planning team must remain small enough in size to make timely decisions, other opportunities for broader school staff input and learning are also important. Focus groups, surveys, and ongoing professional development sessions can all serve to engage staff early on and throughout the SRM development and implementation process.

7. Make Coordination Part of Someone’s Job Description:

Finally, it is important to be realistic about the time and commitment needed to make any lasting change, including implementation of the SRM. In practice, the work of coordination of new initiatives often falls outside of and on top of someone’s existing job duties.³⁷ Coordinating development and implementation of a new initiative should consider what any one person can reasonably do, especially if their job involves working on multiple new initiatives at once. A realistic expectation can support the individual or individuals who are tasked with coordination and, at the same time, support a strong SRM effort.



The research on initiative fatigue offers a somber warning about schools taking on too much change at one time or over a continuous period. At the same time, it offers realistic strategies for avoiding initiative fatigue. Many of these strategies fit well with SRM development and implementation. Intentional preliminary work to use these strategies in introducing the SRM is likely to serve the efficacy of SRM development and implementation well.

Securing buy-in from school staff in the creation and implementation of a school responder model is essential to establishing a new approach to responding to school infractions. By decreasing the likelihood of initiative fatigue, schools are better positioned to secure this necessary buy-in and support and develop successful SRMs that can help keep students with mental health, substance use, and trauma conditions in school and out of the juvenile justice system.

Putting it All Together | A Case Study: Nevada's School Responder Model Framework

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Learning Environments, Nevada Department of Education*

Listen, listen again, and listen with empathy was the first step, middle step, and an integral and continuous part in our journey for our Rural Nevada Health Hub based off the SRM. Indeed, listening gave us our cadence, a kind of heel, toe, step, reflect. This cadence gave us some quick guidelines. Because we were listening, we could start from our strengths and work from there. This was a way to elevate our local experts and to honor the work that had come before, and to honor the context or our rural Nevada culture in all its diversity. Thus, we immediately found that our Health Hub or SRM did not have to start from “scratch” because of the time and effort of so many, we were starting with a rich ecosystem of people’s experiences. Those experiences gave us everything we needed to ensure that school staff, student and community members could respond to

student and staff needs when needed—we did not have to wait for formal interventions like special education or juvenile justice.

In each other we discovered collective enoughness; we had everything here we needed to make positive change for each other. We met and talked about our strengths and what each one of us could contribute. We shared data, crafted goals, and discussed indicators of our success. Our heel, toe, step, reflect cadence took us quickly into places we did not expect and did not realize we could make the lives of each other better, so quickly.

An example, because we were listening, our students and families told us of the pain of unmet dental needs. This issue seemed like a long way from education or diversion, but the students were not graduating with all their teeth and kindergarteners were complaining

of tooth pain. In a matter of weeks, we expanded our community to include regional health nurses, hygienists, and dentists and turned a gym and classrooms into temporary dental offices twice a year to serve the entire family, not just students. As a result, our kindergarteners began arriving with 50%–80% less dental caries (tooth decay). Teachers and school staff felt relieved and trust was built that, “yes together we can create positive change.” We took the processes of screening, intervening, prevention, and treatment (SRM) we learned meeting dental needs to also meet mental health needs the following year because it made sense to the students, parents, and school staff.

The big lesson for us was not to rip out the current garden with its weeds, messy rows, overgrown hedges, and old children’s art. Instead honor what is planted already, appreciate the resilience and benefits of the weeds, and work with that already strong environment to make

that short walk into greatness. Our major learning elements were as follows:

1. Listen before you start; listen throughout the project
2. We not them, and with not for
3. Start from strengths, you are never starting from zero or a negative number - NEVER
4. Honor the community’s ecosystem celebrating the diversity—diversity is strength and life
5. Acknowledge, use, and celebrate collective enoughness-- elevate local expert
6. Focus on building systems like the SRM and hubs that bring out the best in people - both the implementors and students. For example, when selecting screening systems, think about how this system will this bring out the best in teachers, administrators, and students. If it is not a mutually reinforcing system that helps everyone who is a part of it—find something else that will.

Ms. McGill was previously the Executive Director of Healthy Communities Coalition of Lyon and Storey Counties where she interfaced with over 75 formal partners, youth, and many citizens to bring them together to discuss how to make the region thrive. She worked with NCYOJ (then NCMHJJ) on the Lyon County, Nevada Team to help develop and pilot their school responder model as part of the 2015-16 Policy Academy-Action Network supported by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. After launching the Rural Nevada Health Hub, Ms. McGill transitioned to her work in the Office of Safe and Respectful Learning Environments at the Nevada Department of Education.

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About

The National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice aims to improve life opportunities for youth by advancing policy and practice improvements that ensure the well-being of youth, families, and communities.

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End Notes

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