



## Article

# Five signs your reform has become another education fad

Eager vendors, early-adopting educators, and media adulation can be taken as evidence that a reform is going swimmingly—but these signs are frequently misread.

Education Week

EDUCATION

K-12 SCHOOLING

October 8, 2019

I've long been the skunk at the garden party when it comes to folks cheerfully regaling one another with happy tales of wondrous schools, districts, and instructional programs. After all, I'm the guy who couldn't get stoked about No Child Left Behind or small high schools or the Race to the



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Denning of small high schools or the race to the Top or the teacher-evaluation binge or the Common Core. Of course, that's all old news. The party is now filled with talk of social and emotional learning, career and technical education, "equitable" programming, early childhood, and such.

I've written before about how these new enthusiasms risk repeating the mistakes that helped turn earlier reforms from sensible efforts into self-defeating fads. In response, more than a few readers have reached out with a version of: "OK, I get it. But how can you tell when an effort is just building healthy momentum—and when it's at risk of turning into a fad?"

It's a great question. While I fear that I don't have a great answer, school reforms tend to stand or fall based on how they're experienced by parents and teachers. The problem for many reforms is that champions wind up imagining that teachers and parents are on board long before they really are.

Making allies of parents and teachers requires getting them on board, which means slowly making them believe that this stuff really works. Among other things, this requires reformers to protect their handiwork from shady vendors, wacky allies, unrealistic hype, and goofy practices—all of which can be hard to do. It's doubly so

when reformers are riding high and don't want to create unnecessary conflict. That means reformers can find their handiwork defined by its worst excesses.

So, what are the warning signs that a reform is at risk of being undone? Here are five:

**The Vendor Onslaught:** Perhaps the earliest sign, but one visible only to those paying close attention, is the way that vendors of all sorts start to bombard school systems, journalists, and any perceived "influencer" with their wares. Vendors who had previously shown little interest in X will suddenly be sending out glossy guides, four-color marketing pitches, workshop invitations, "aligned" resources, and more. It's a sure sign that educators are about to be inundated by a wave of slapdash junk.

**Fawning Media:** Another early sign is that media accounts are uniformly glowing. In all the outlets, you'll see advocates, business leaders, and pundits glomming onto your cause as an easy way to score points. This tends to happen early on because reporters are looking for something new to report on; scholars and advocates are happy to explain the merits of this new thing; and you only have a handful of meanies likely to badmouth an effort which is building momentum and still taking

shape. This cheerful but vague coverage can leave advocates overconfident and unprepared to answer criticism.

### **“Early Adopter” Educators Clamber Aboard:**

This is one of the great counterintuitive indicators. We know that teacher support matters. And every reform can point to its die-hard classroom champions. The thing is, while each new new thing attracts a fringe of early-adopter educators and true believers, most educators tend to develop a fairly refined sense of skepticism over time about all this (see Charles Payne’s [\*So Much Reform, So Little Change\*](#) for a wonderful take on this). It’s easy to mistake the excited testimonials from a few teachers for evidence that “teachers love it.” Reformers should be especially wary when leaders, in every school and every district, are bragging that they too are doing [insert exciting new acronym here]. That’s a sure-fire warning that something is being done haphazardly by lots of not-yet-sold teachers, and with less than optimal fidelity.

**Ubiquity:** The magic words start showing up in everything: political speeches, organization mission statements, philanthropic funding priorities, school district missives, ed school job descriptions. At this stage, a reform is getting leached of all meaning, and it’s vulnerable to

being used by ideologues and those with personal agendas to push all manner of silly things. As a result, it's easy for critics to latch onto silly examples of overtesting, crazy teacher-evaluation provisions, or "Common Core worksheets" and use those to fan doubts about the whole enterprise.

**Welcome to Late Night:** And that leads to the terminal stage, when a cause catches the eye of comedians, late-night hosts, and cable personalities. These people are not in the business of fostering learned conversations about school improvement. They're looking for people and places to ridicule. If a movement is being lambasted on national TV, it's obviously a problem. But even if it's the opponents who are getting flamed, it's usually also a problem—because it means the effort is getting tangled in the culture wars. And tactics for fighting a culture war are, shall we say, at odds with forging broad support from parents and teachers across a patchwork of states and communities.

In real time, all of these signs are routinely misinterpreted. Eager vendors, cheerful early-adopting educators, and media adulation are seen as evidence that things are going swimmingly—that, huzzah!, a reform is "going to scale." In fact, these things frequently mask real problems. They

these things frequently mask real problems. They deserve to be gingerly studied as symptoms rather than celebrated as metrics of success.