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From Vision to Action in Canadian Education

2014 Regional Workshop Follow Up Report

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The Challenge to Change: From Vision to Action in Canadian Education

2014 Regional Workshop Follow Up Report

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About CEA

Founded in 1891, the Canadian Education Association (CEA) is a network of passionate educators advancing ideas for greater student and teacher engagement in public education. CEA does this by conducting research and spreading useful ideas through its publications, website, workshops, symposia, blog, videos, and social media channels, and supporting education systems to be more adaptive to the rapidly changing needs of all learners in an effort to reverse the trend of students ‘tuning out’ of their learning opportunities.



About Report Author Stephen Hurley

After serving in Ontario’s public school system for over 30 years, Stephen Hurley continues to work to open up spaces for vibrant conversations about change in education across Canada. A writer, podcaster and father of two, he believes that our current way of “doing school” is in need of some bold new ideas that will breathe more fire into the learning lives of young people, educators and the communities in which they work.

STAY INVOLVED IN THIS PAN-CANADIAN CONVERSATION

Visit **www.challengetochange.ca** to access a Discussion Guide, to share comments on our discussion threads, and to access valuable resources to inform and enhance your educational change conversations.



The Challenge to Change: From Vision to Action in Canadian Education



Introduction

One of the commitments emerging from the **Canadian Education Association's** *What's Standing in the Way of Change in Education?* workshop in Calgary in October 2013 was to convene a series of Regional Workshops designed to expand the conversation about change in Canada's education systems. To this end, in the Spring of 2014, similar workshops were held in New Brunswick, Manitoba, Ontario and British Columbia with a final session held in Quebec in August, 2014.

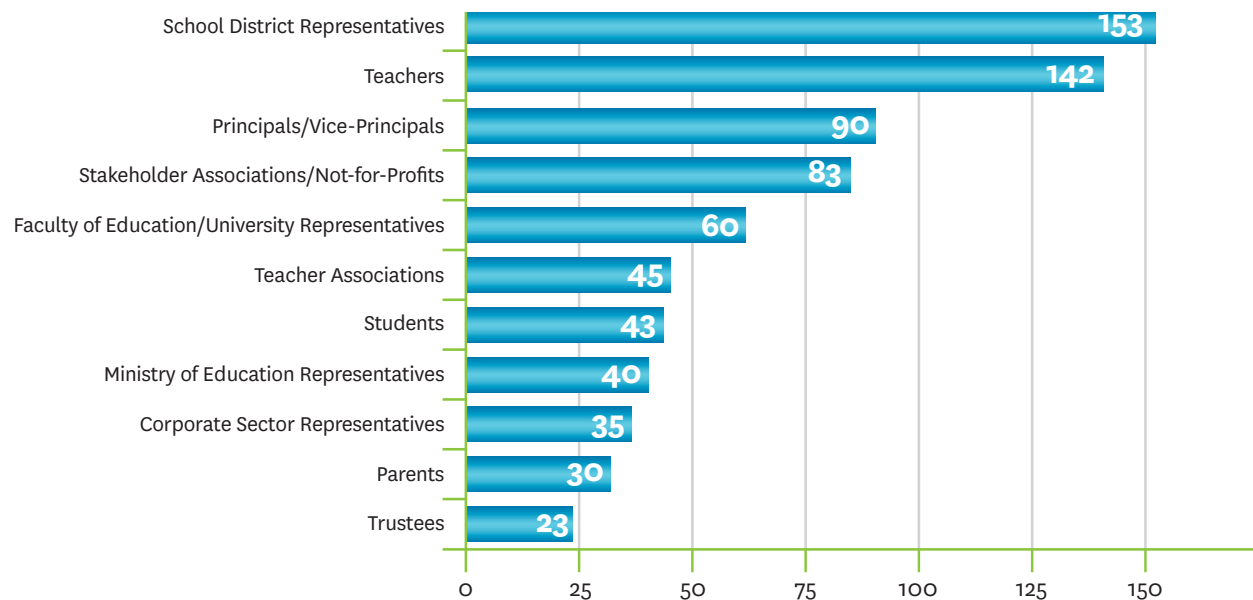
The energy around identifying the types of barriers that have complicated and, at times, confounded change efforts in schools across the country was inspired by two previous CEA research initiatives: *What Did You Do In School Today?* and *Teaching the Way We Aspire to Teach*. Both initiatives focused on different aspects of engagement in our school systems – the former an attempt to raise the voices of Canadian students and the latter focusing on the lives of educators and their stories of when they were teaching at their best. The strong visions for schools and discovery of such powerful teaching moments kept largely 'under the radar' that emerged from *Teaching the Way We Aspire to Teach* inspired CEA to explore what was really standing in the way of scaling these practices throughout school districts to benefit more students and educators.

Similar to the Calgary event, the design of the workshops followed a narrative structure, moving from the visions and aspirations that participants held for their schools, a sense of what stood in the way of those visions being fully realized, a reflection on moments when change has been possible in their own particular contexts, and a creative approach to imagining how more systemic change might be enabled in the future.

The process resulted in a great deal of feedback. Close to 1,000 individual vision statements, over 3,500 Post-it® notes and references to almost 100 change projects were collected between October 2013 and August of 2014, representing an excellent opportunity to develop themes, trends and a strong sense of where Canadians stand with regard to the process of change in our schools.

Using a qualitative approach, practically every word written in each of the workshops was entered, coded and analyzed. The following report presents some of the major results from the *What's Standing in the Way of Change in Education?* initiative. It is not intended to provide detailed analysis of regional results but, instead, offers a way of feeding back the viewpoints of Canadian shareholders right across the country; and to use what has been heard to help frame a strategy for moving forward in local settings, regional levels and, indeed, on a pan-Canadian scale.

A Snapshot of CEA Workshop Participants



A Vision for Canadian Education

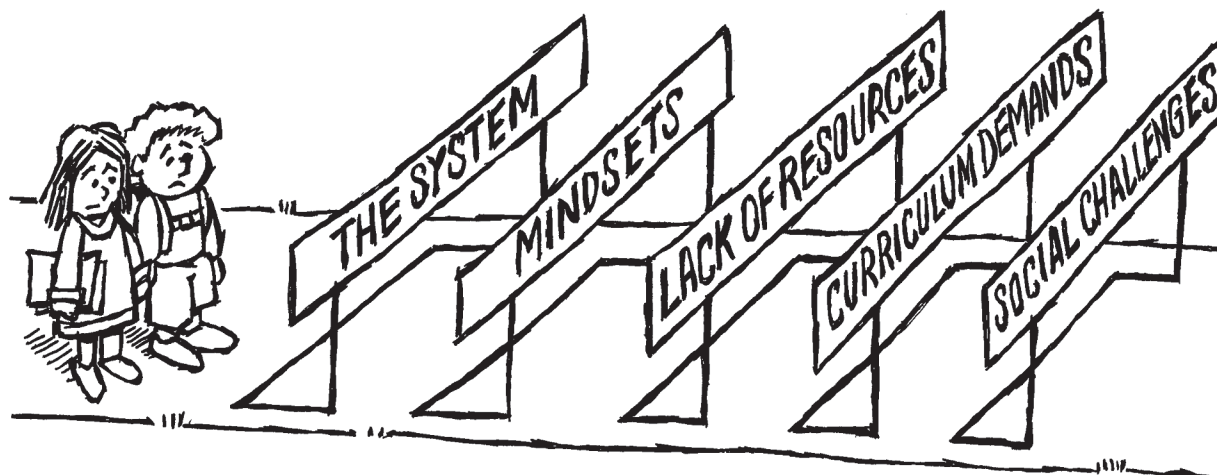
The paragraph below reflects the nearly 250 vision statements collected from the first *What's Standing in the Way of Change in Education?* workshop held in Calgary in October 2013. Vision statements were also written and collected from each of the five Regional Workshops, and they closely mirror what was gathered and reported from Calgary. The dream that Canadians have for their schools is strong and compelling and can be articulated in the following way:

Canadians envision their schools to be places where powerful, meaningful learning experiences are available to all learners in an environment that is respectful of individual needs and differences. They are places where student voice is clearly evident in the way that programs are conceived, designed and implemented. Schools form the centre of a broader community-based context that understands ongoing learning to be not just a privilege for the academically gifted, but an integral part of being human for all citizens. Canadian schools are not only reflective of the complexity of modern life, but will embrace the new possibilities that exist as a result of that complexity.

“If our aim is to raise the level of enthusiasm for learning among students, that requires enthusiastic and passionate educators.”

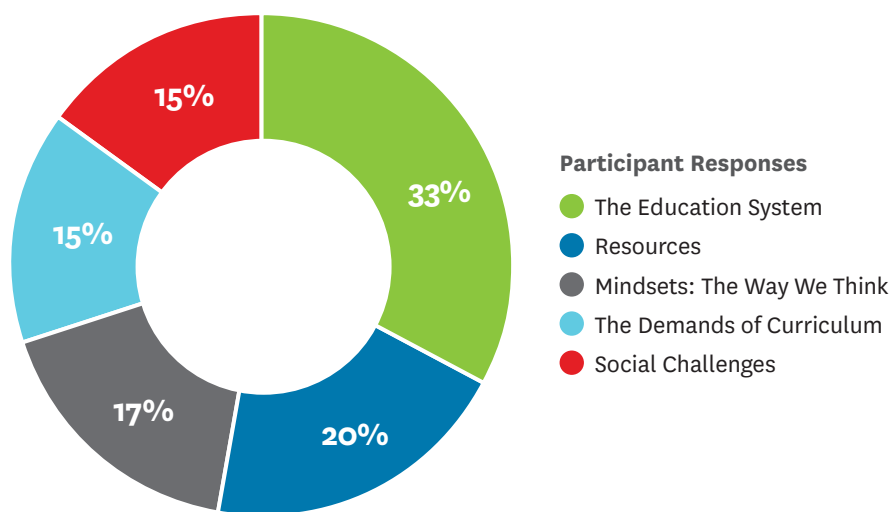
– New Brunswick participant

Barriers to Change in Education



At each of the five Regional Workshops, participants were asked to identify the things that, in their experience, stood in the way of the change that they wanted to see. While responses expressed the unique contexts that participants brought to the discussion, there were identifiable themes that emerged. The five leading barriers identified are represented in Chart 1 with numbers indicating the frequency that each theme was identified in table conversations. Results from the five Regional Workshops have been combined with data from the same discussion that occurred at the pan-Canadian workshop in Calgary to form a comprehensive picture from all of the events held across Canada in 2013 and 2014.

Chart 1: What's Standing in the Way of Change | Leading National Barriers



Although a strong attempt was made to separate the perceived barriers into distinct categories, it became evident through listening to table group conversations and reviewing the data returned from the workshops that there is a good deal of overlap between many of the elements identified. This speaks to the complexity of school systems throughout Canada and the variety of contexts represented by the diversity of shareholders involved in the discussions.

It is also interesting to note that, while many of the identified barriers are part of the structures and infrastructures of current school systems, a significant number are rooted in the deeply embedded assumptions and mindsets that people have about the purpose of education, the meaning of success and nature of change, itself.

Some Barriers Identified by Workshop Participants

Not taking the time to establish trust in relationships before teaching students; students don't care about what teachers know, until they know their teachers care about them.

- Ontario Participant

The amount of policies we have to follow is standing in the way of change or even expressing ourselves.

- Manitoba Participant

No room for the community in schools and no room for schools in the community.

- Quebec Participant

(We have) curriculum for a world that is no more.

- New Brunswick Participant

Because I went to school, I'm an education expert?

- Quebec Participant

Adult assumptions that youth (are) not capable of constructing what they learn, how they learn and how they show what they learn.

- British Columbia Participant

Change is inherently frightening and fatiguing.

- British Columbia Participant

Belief that the purpose of education is to "get a job" nothing about learning to be human, live a good life, learn to participate in a democratic society as a citizen.

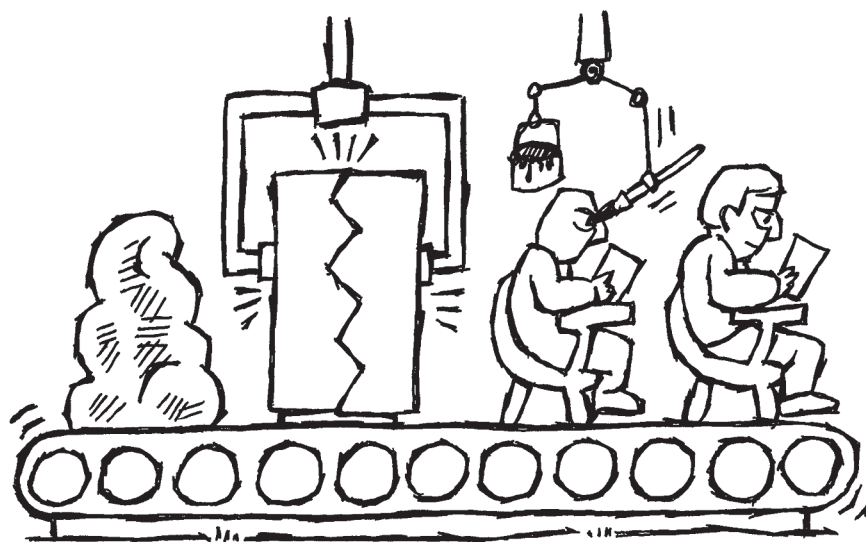
- Manitoba Participant

Deep learning doesn't happen in 90-minute blocks.

- Ontario Participant

Exploring the Barriers in More Depth

Leading Barrier: The Education System

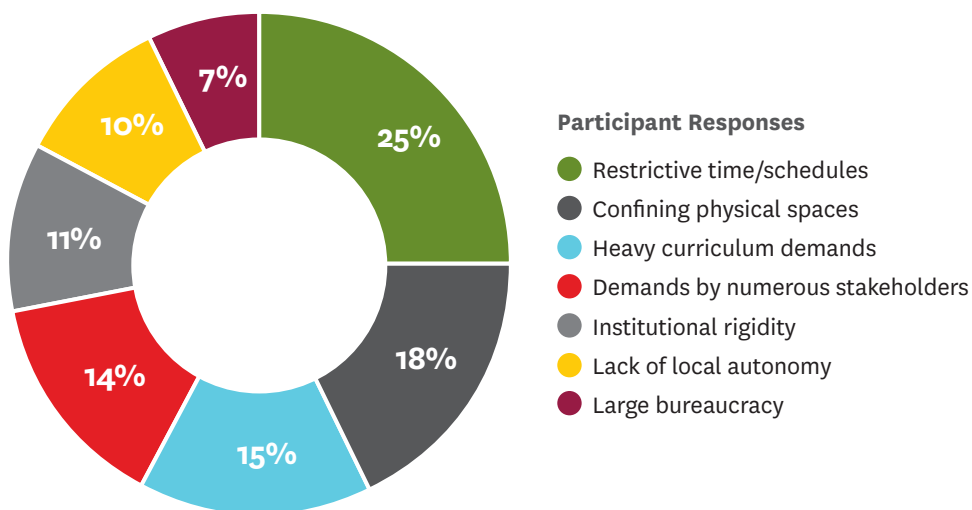


“Obstacle:
classroom
standardization.
If you don’t fit
the mould,
you have a big
problem.”

– Quebec participant

Many of the elements of the modern school are quite familiar to most Canadians. In fact, they are the structures and practices that make our schools so recognizable: timetables and scheduling, age-based grading, evaluation techniques, curriculum organization and even the physical layout of schools. Many of the conversations we had throughout the country pointed to these very systemic structures as standing in the way of substantial change. It was strongly felt that more flexibility in exploring and challenging the purpose of many of the elements of school that we tend to take for granted was necessary if large-scale change was going to happen. Restrictive approaches to both course/program scheduling, and the resulting curriculum fragmentation were two major elements of this dimension.

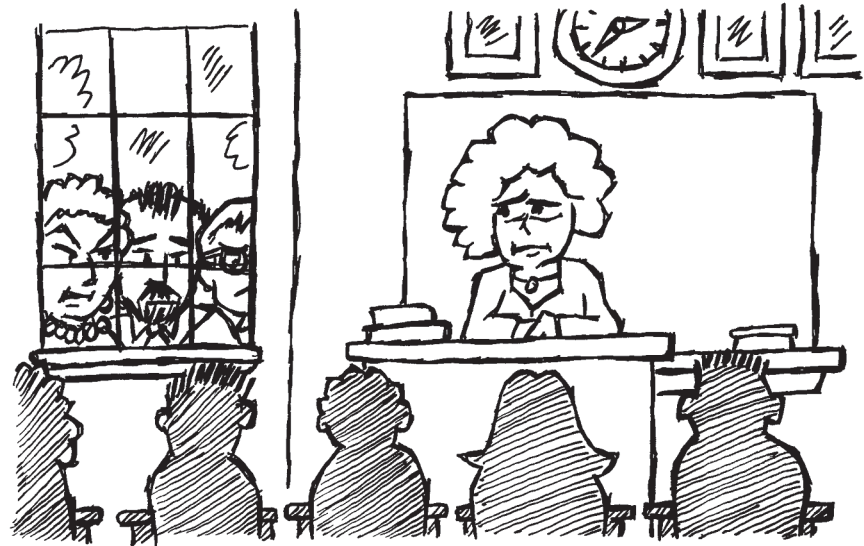
Chart 2: Structures in the Education System That Stand In The Way of Change



Leading Barrier: Mindsets - The Way We Think

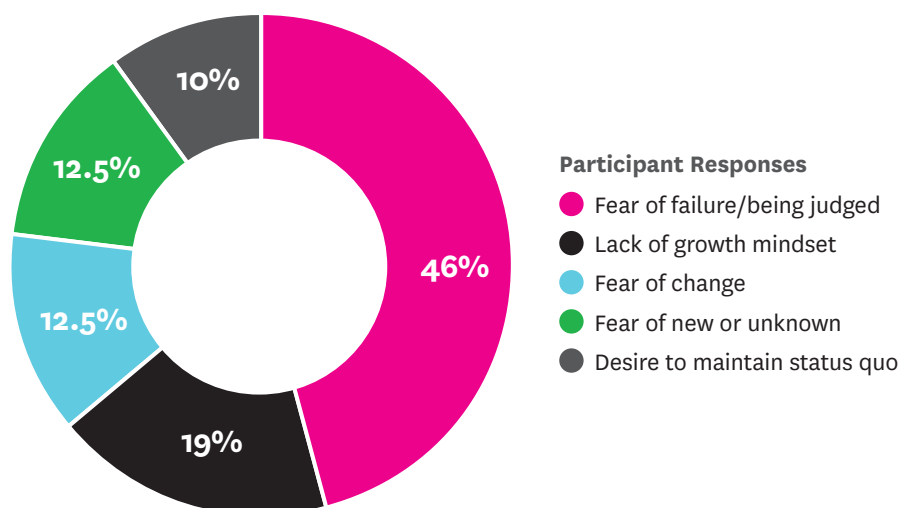
“Deep-seated fear of the unknown, of making a mistake, of being judged.”

– Quebec participant

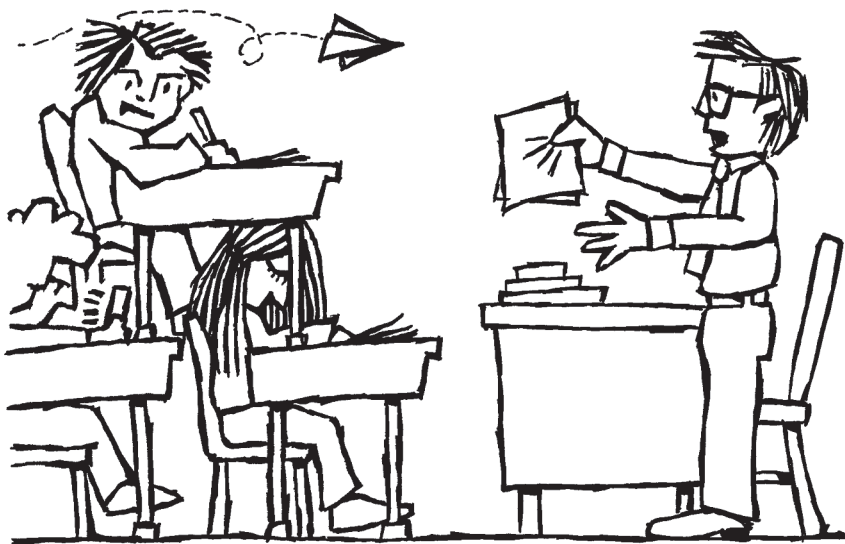


A great deal of conversation took place about what can best be described as **mindset** or the dispositions that could be identified throughout Canadian education systems. It was felt that a great deal of aversion to risk and the fear of, or reluctance to change surrounded attempts to move systems ahead and that many aspects of education were influenced heavily by traditional views and expectations. In some conversations, a culture of compliance that discouraged major changes in practice was identified as a strong barrier.

Chart 3: Mindsets Are Standing In The Way of Change in Education



Leading Barrier: Resources



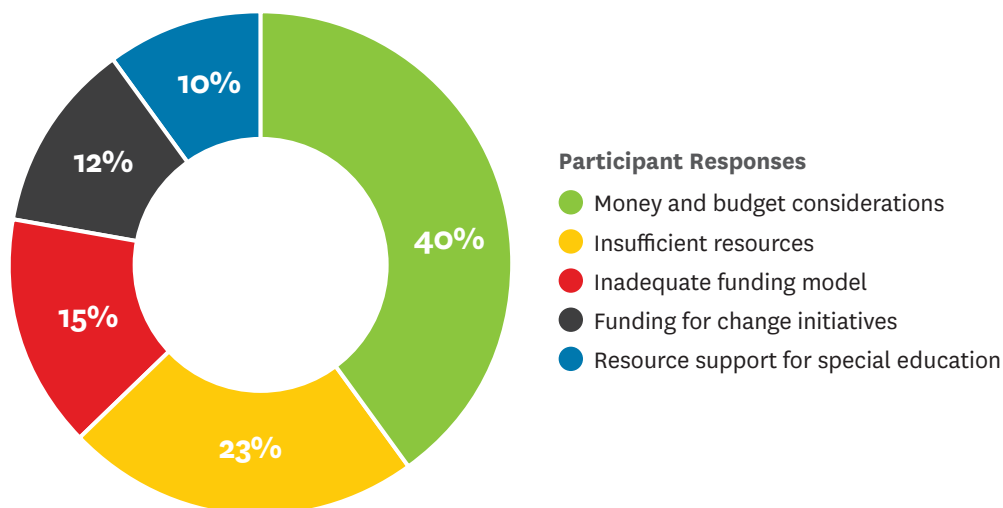
“We’re not empowering teachers with the right resources to lead, inspire and teach in the way they would like.”

– B.C. participant

As might be expected, inadequate funding and insufficient system resources were identified as key barriers to change in all regions. Many participants pointed to a funding model that no longer allowed them to respond to the needs arising in many dimensions of the system, including the very change initiatives that were being initiated by districts.

Beyond a good deal of reference to financial resources, workshop participants pointed to non-monetary resources such as technology, support staff, classroom materials, etc. While, admittedly, all of these needs can be traced to funding, the focus in a significant number of cases was on the effective distribution of available resources to meet the needs of the entire system.

Chart 4: More Resources Needed to Support Change



Leading Barrier: The Demands of Curriculum

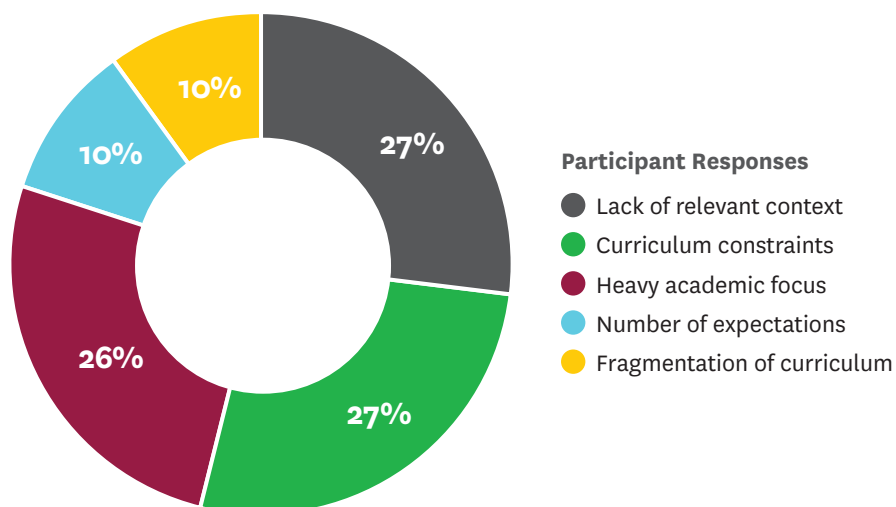
“Curriculum is no longer easily linked to the world that we live in.”

– Manitoba participant



Although a conversation about curriculum might find a home within the systemic structures theme, it is separated here in order to highlight some of the more subtle elements that emerged from regional conversations. Many participants expressed the feeling that, as it is currently imagined and constituted, curriculum is actually holding many change initiatives back. The desire for learning to enable students to make meaningful connections to the world was significant here as were the beliefs that curriculum is overwhelming in its size and its inflexibility.

Chart 5: The Nature of Curriculum Limits Thinking About Change in Education



Leading Barrier: Social Challenges

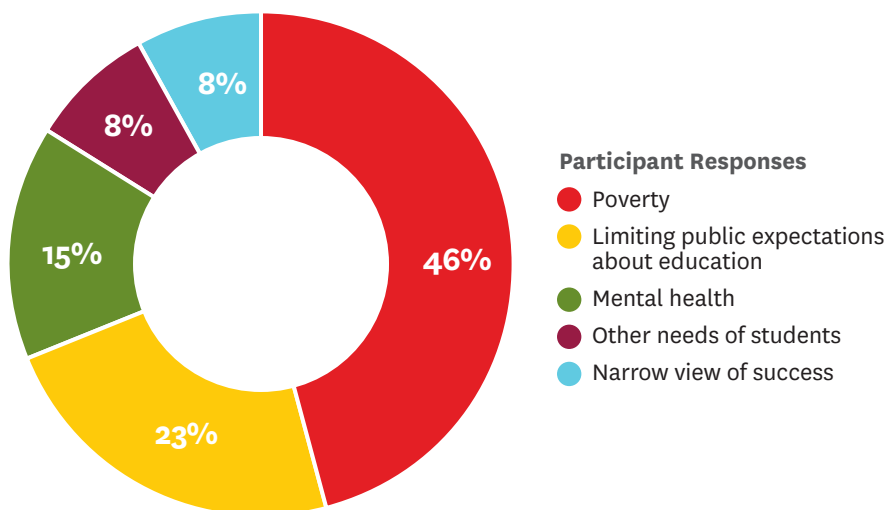


“Outside influences like mental health and broken homes are being placed on the shoulders of public education.”

- Manitoba participant

Many participants recognized that, beyond systemic constraints and challenges, change in education was also influenced by a variety of social realities that affected the lives of students and families. These not only included economic and health issues, but the traditional attitudes and expectations that parents and the wider community brought to conversations about change.

Chart 6: Meeting the Social Challenges of Students Influences School Change



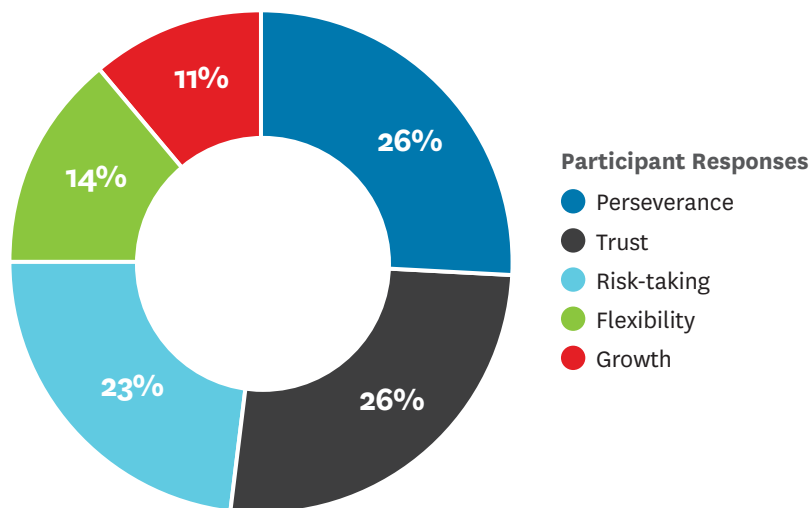
Actions Taken to Mobilize Change in Education

In each of the five Regional Workshops, participants were asked to think about their identified barriers and reflect on times when they were able to affect change in their local contexts. In telling their stories, groups were encouraged to listen for and record the types of actions that were most effective in mobilizing their stories of change. The following three themes emerged as being important in the wide variety of change stories that were shared.

1. Mindset

Just as the attitudes and dispositions of shareholders could prove to stand in the way of change, workshop participants identified **mindset** as a key element to their own stories of success. Thinking back on their own experiences of change, many noted that a willingness to stay with their initiative, and an understanding of the need for some risk-taking were important in achieving memorable results.

Chart 7: Attitudes and Dispositions That Support Change in Education



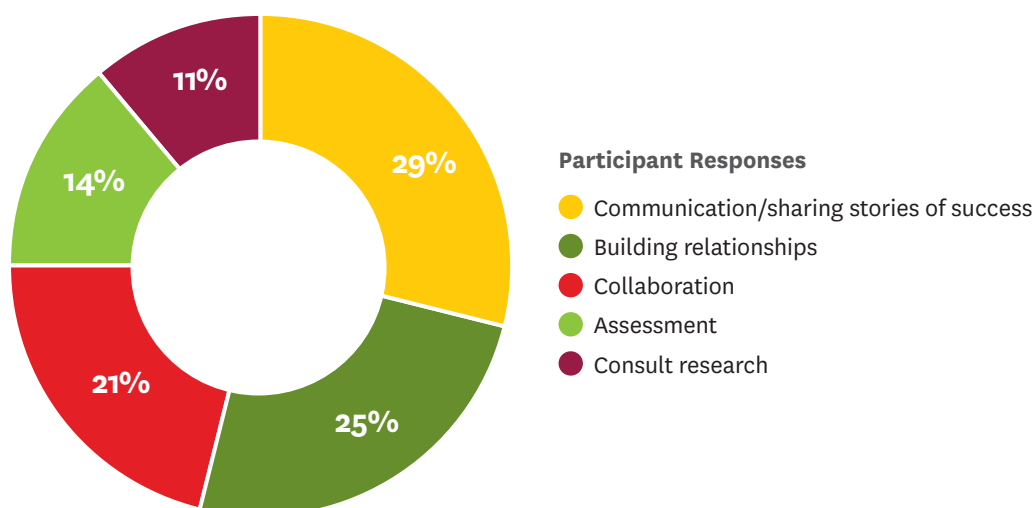
“The courage to be imaginative!”

– British Columbia participant

2. Strategies that Enable Change

Building relationships that are respectful and trusting were among the key enabling strategies that participants drew out of their stories of change. Working together and communicating effectively with members of the community both inside and outside the school were also vital to the success of identified change initiatives.

Chart 8: Strategies that Enable Change in Education



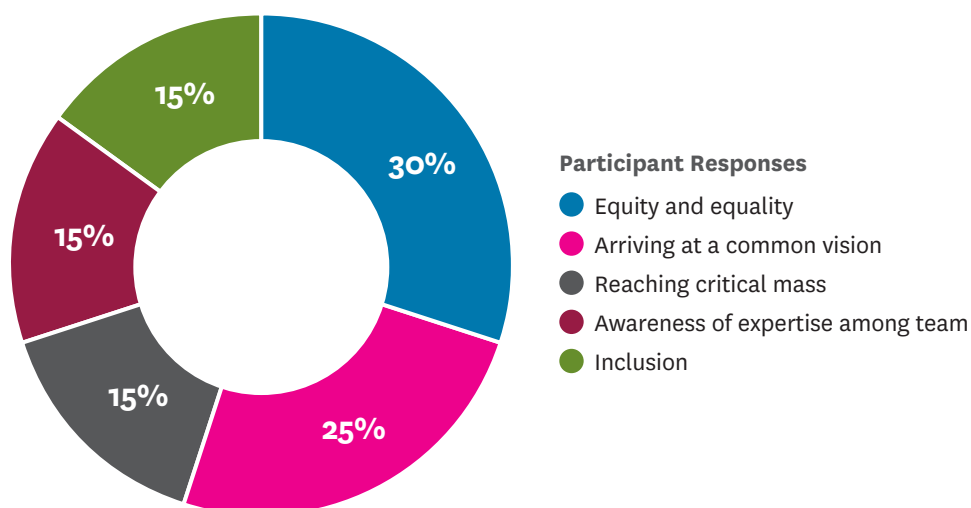
“Effective communication matters.”

– British Columbia participant

3. Visions and Values in Moving Towards Change

Participants were also able to identify certain strong ideas that grounded their stories of change – ideas that not only acted as guiding values, but also as visionary ends in themselves. One such idea that was drawn from several stories was a commitment to equity. Change initiatives were directed at creating better learning environment for all students, and not just a few. Among other things, it was also important for several participants that, through the change process, a sense of common commitment and vision emerged.

Chart 9: Visions and Values in Moving Towards Change





Next Steps: The Challenge to Change

There is little doubt that the challenges faced by those working to effect change in Canadian education can seem daunting, if not overwhelming. Our systems are steeped in tradition, familiar practices and ways of thinking that combine to maintain a strong sense of the *status quo*. Even when identified, the challenges presented by the complexity of our education systems can seem to make substantial, lasting change confounding at best.

Yet, as we heard from so many participants in the CEA's *What's Standing in the Way of Change in Education?* workshops, individuals, teams of educators and entire communities are mobilizing initiatives that, inspired by their visions for a different kind of system, are successfully addressing these obstacles, in some cases stepping around them and, in others, finding ways to overcome them completely. This innovation occurs despite the continued tendency of many school districts to keep these practices contained within pilot projects and alternative schools.

We are at a moment where the tension that exists between the obstacles standing in the way of change and the well-articulated visions for the future of Canadian education is at an all-time high. This is a moment where more and more people are responding by taking up the challenge to change in unique and powerful ways. They are finding imaginative approaches for responding to student voice, creative ways of involving community partners, including parents, in change initiatives and innovative ideas for making their schools energetic and accessible places for deep learning.

It is the hope of the Canadian Education Association that the ideas and actions articulated through the *What's Standing in the Way of Change in Education?* initiative will support and provoke systemic change by continuing to take root throughout the country at the local level, and that the emergence of a larger network of change begins to affect the way we think and plan for future generations.

CEA sees *The Challenge to Change* as a recognition that the road ahead is not without obstacles and barriers. At the same time, however, it is also as a call to action that will inspire all Canadians. For local communities and school districts, it is a challenge to continue to look for opportunities to introduce unique change conversations and initiatives, despite what might be standing in the way. For those at leadership levels, it is a challenge to examine existing structures through a critical lens, ensuring that the systems that we have actually enable and energize the work being envisioned by so many. And for policy-makers, it is a challenge to ensure that the conditions are right for both sustainability and scalability as we move forward.

How are you accepting *The Challenge to Change*?

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