

A hand is pointing at a whiteboard covered with several sticky notes. The sticky notes are in shades of yellow, orange, and pink. Some of the notes have handwritten text, including the word "EDGE" and "YOU NEED". The background is a soft, out-of-focus white.

MIDDLE STATES INNOVATION LEADERS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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THE WORLD IS SHIFTING...

COVID-19. An attack on the United States Capitol. War in Ukraine. ChatGPT. This decade is only slightly more than 2 years old and already it has yielded massive disruptions.

School leaders have made herculean efforts to adapt not only to these near-term challenges, but also to the broader and deeper tectonic shifts of the 21st century.

WHICH MADE US WONDER...

Do highly adaptive and innovative school leaders share some common “character DNA”?

If so, how do they facilitate change, and do they face a common set of obstacles?

So we decided to do some research. And in this “Year of the Middle States Network,” what better place to look to our own members?

A photograph of a classroom scene. A female teacher with her hair in a bun, wearing a dark blazer over a white shirt, stands in front of a whiteboard. She is smiling and pointing her right hand towards the board. In the foreground, several students are seated at desks, their backs to the camera. One student on the right has their hand raised. The whiteboard behind the teacher has some faint blue handwriting, including the words "ing" and "to the".

WHAT DID WE INVESTIGATE?

We solicited nominations of innovative school leaders from the Middle States staff. We received 61 nominations drawn from about 2700 MSA member schools. 17 the 61 nominees were available for interviews.

We conducted the interviews using structured questions:

- *What are the 2 or 3 most important vision / growth / innovation projects that you're working on?*
- *For these projects to succeed, what has to change at your school?*
- *How would you fill in this blank:
"If I could only get better at one thing as a change leader, it would be _____."*

We then synthesized answers and drew conclusions.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Four themes recurred throughout the interviews:



THE BIGGEST OBSTACLES TO INNOVATION ARE TIME AND MINDSETS.



CONFLICT RESOLUTION MEANS “ORCHESTRATING” RATHER THAN “MANAGING” CONFLICTS.



SCHOOL LEADERS INNOVATE THROUGH EXPERIMENTATION MORE THAN “PLANNING.”



SCHOOL LEADERS INNOVATE ON BEHALF OF STUDENTS.



THE BIGGEST OBSTACLES TO INNOVATION ARE TIME AND MINDSETS

Several school leaders described their problems with time management and wishing they had more time in a day to work on their innovation projects.

Some respondents also acknowledged their troubles with delegation. One administrator declared, “I need to allow others to take the lead. I need to give my ‘baby’ to other people so that they can take care of it.”

“Collaboration could not be forced. Some longer-tenured faculty were uneasy because they felt like they needed to know everything.”

Interviewees also described the entrenched mindsets of colleagues. One respondent said that “collaboration could not be forced. Some longer-tenured faculty were uneasy because they felt like they needed to know everything.”

Respondents mentioned the difficulty of introducing new initiatives to faculty, whether due to miscomprehension, imposter syndrome, or “data denial” about a promising (or even proven) method.



CONFLICT RESOLUTION MEANS “ORCHESTRATING” RATHER THAN “MANAGING” CONFLICTS.

One respondent noted that change “is difficult, it’s disruptive, and you’re gonna take heat. But it’s for the students.”

To stimulate and contain inevitable conflicts, school leaders described creating “open” environments that are transparent and inclusive.

“Our teachers need to see me as someone who is working with them as opposed to someone who is ‘making them work.’”

Examples include involving students in the decision-making process and allowing teachers varying degrees of freedom to experiment.

Another method for “orchestrating” conflict involves the leader participating in change efforts rather than directing them from a distance. One respondent described how teachers “need to see [school leaders] as someone who is working with them as opposed to someone who is ‘making them work.’”



SCHOOL LEADERS INNOVATE THROUGH EXPERIMENTATION MORE THAN “PLANNING”

Several respondents mentioned encouraging their teachers to experiment.

One respondent even mentioned a formal process for funding and subsequent review to see how successful the program was. He said that his “attitude toward our school leaders is, ‘Do it and let’s see where we are in a year’. We say everything is a pilot for a year.”

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In addition to bottom-up experiments, some interviewees talked about learning from experiments run by other teachers and schools.

One school leader remarked that “if I see something new, I will try it” and another emphasized the need to create a “forum for the spread of ideas.”



SCHOOL LEADERS INNOVATE ON BEHALF OF STUDENTS.

Interviewees expressed a consistent and strong orientation toward innovating for the benefit of students. While this may sound self-evident—schools exist for students—often innovation efforts are pet projects of adults (administrators, teachers, parents).

Several school leaders mentioned innovations focused on student well-being / SEL programs, infrastructure for special needs students, and flu-season social distancing. One school leader described how his school focused on “providing space for young people to think with intentionality about their impact on the world” through a STEM program.

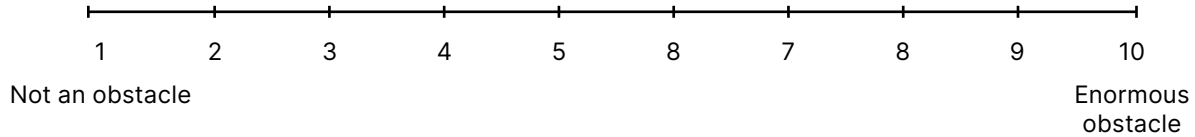
“We want to provide space for young people to think with intentionality about their impact on the world.”

Innovation on behalf of students also means thinking about learning experiences from the perspective of the students themselves. For example, one school leader explained that her school placed choir students, who often sing in Latin, into Latin classes as opposed to another world language.

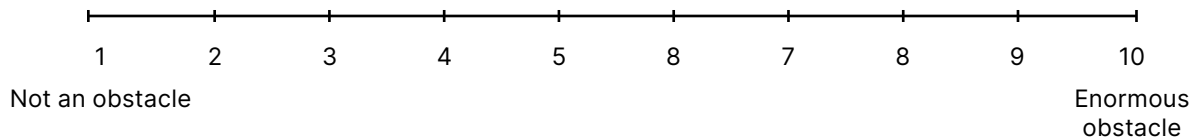
ASSESS YOURSELF

Circle your answers.

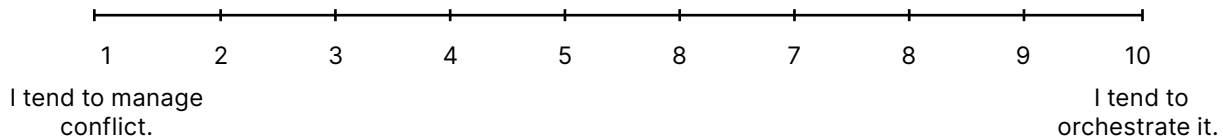
How much of an innovation obstacle is time?



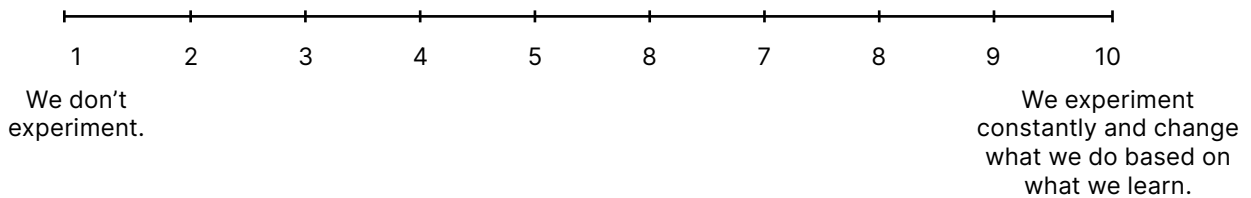
How much of an innovation obstacle is mindset?



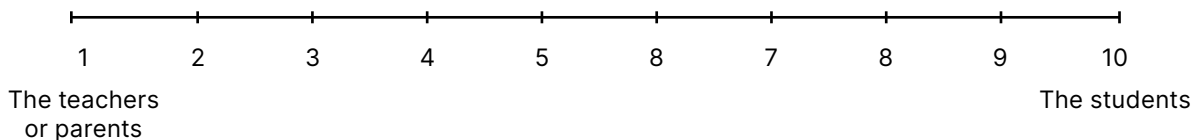
Do you tend to manage conflict or orchestrate it?



How strong is your school's culture of experimentation?



Who is the focus of your school's innovations?



[Click here to share your responses.](#)

It will take less than 2 minutes for you to strengthen this research and help your peers at other schools.

NEXT STEPS

Innovating in schools is irreducibly hard work, but we can minimize the challenge by learning from successful change leaders. Want to learn more?



SUBSCRIBE TO THE MSA BLOG (CLICK HERE)

The landscape for schools is rapidly evolving. Stay on top of those changes through our blog.



JOIN THE WAITING LIST FOR OUR WORKSHOPS (CLICK HERE)

The Two Journeys, a masterclass in change leadership.

Forces at Play, a scenario planning workshop on the future of education.

The Best Teachers on Earth, a workshop on programming for teacher growth.

Strategic Plan Health Check, a workshop to assess your progress on your strategic plan and diagnose challenges.



REQUEST A FREE CONSULTATION (CLICK HERE)

Every school's innovation challenges look a little bit different. Take advantage of a free consultation with one of our change leadership experts.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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