"They were energetic, but, more than that, energizing."

Photos ©Wonderfile

Leadership Across the System

by Michael Fullan

Two ideas have converged in our recent work on education reform at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto: (1) the need for system reform, which I call the tri-level solution—what has to happen at the school/community level, the district level, and the system or policy level—and (2) leadership as the key driver (Fullan, 2005).

System Reform

The question for system reform is what is needed to bring about tri-level development; i.e., what new capacities are needed at the school/community, district, and system or policy levels (including state and federal). Not only must each level develop new capacities in its own right, but also the levels must interact in new mutually reinforcing ways.

We know a fair amount about the first two levels (school/community and district levels), and we are beginning to see some recent good examples at the third level (system or policy levels). At the school/community level, Newmann et al. provide a good summary of most of the key factors. They found that school capacity was the key to success. They defined capacity as the collective power of the full staff to work together to improve student achievement. Five factors were identified:

- Knowledge, skills, and dispositions of individuals

- Professional community (the quality of relationships among teachers and between teachers and the principal)

- Program coherence

- Technical resources

- School principal

Schools with these five characteristics were effective at developing school staff as a collective force to improve achievement. Newmann

et al. did not focus on parent and community involvement, but other research confirms that effective schools have a strong two-way rapport with the community (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). As teachers develop their collective competence and confidence, they begin to see parents as part of the solution rather than as part of the problem. Without internal school development, teachers tend to play it safe with parents. Keeping parents at a distance in turn widens the gap between the school and the community.

School/Community and District

As we move up the levels in reform, the main point is that the infrastructure matters. Newmann et al. hypothesized that "policies and programs" external to the school would contribute to school capacity. In other words, districts and states could—by policy and design—produce greater school capacity, at least in theory. However, Newmann and his colleagues found no evidence that school capacity was actually *caused* by district/state strategies. If the district/state did not cause school capacity, where did it come from? One can only speculate. My own explanation is that it is a matter of "luck" or "serendipity." For example, a great principal is appointed, certain teachers gravitate to the principal and to each other, the chemistry is great, and the group gels. If such a combination is a matter of luck, there are two implications: first, it will occur only in a minority of cases; and second, it will not last beyond the tenure of the initial group. Thus, without the proactive involvement of the district, school capacity will always be in the minority and will be ephemeral.

Because school capacity remains in the minority, the work of the Institute and others began with whole districts where the goal was to move forward all—or the vast majority of—schools in the district. We have worked with more than a dozen districts to "raise the bar and close the gap" of student achievement—for example, in literacy and numeracy. The lessons from this work, and that of others, are summarized in Fullan, Bertani, and Quinn (2004).

The lessons we identified are:

- Leaders with a coherent driving conceptualization

- Collective moral purpose

- The right bus

- Leadership and capacity building for those on the bus

- Lateral capacity building

- Deep learning

- Productive conflict

- Demanding cultures

- External partners
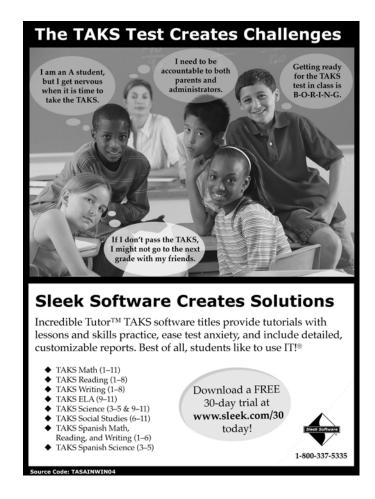
- Growing financial investment

Thus, when district leadership understands the change process and corresponding capacity building, they appreciate what needs to be done. They in turn foster collective moral purpose, organize the structure and roles most effectively (the right bus), provide ongoing leadership development for those in key roles, and formulate strategies where schools learn from each other (lateral capacity building). They pursue deeper learning agendas, appreciate that conflict is part and parcel of moving forward, raise expectations of all to achieve more, and seek external partners and resources that enable them to go even further.
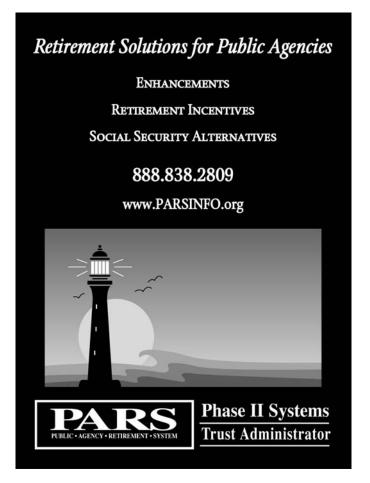
When district leaders understand and use the knowledge base represented by these 10 lessons, we see districtwide success. It is critical, then, that the first two levels of tri-level reform—school/community and district—feed on each other in mutually reinforcing ways.

State-Level Engagement

The third level—state policy—is the most difficult to develop because of the political complexity. There is a natural political tendency to focus on accountability rather than to integrate accountability and capacity building. Top leaders—governors, state superintendents, and other senior policymakers—must begin to focus their efforts in different ways. In particular, they need to take seriously capacity building. This entails thinking differently, developing policies and strategies that focus on leadership development, and allocating corresponding resources to these activities.

We have a small and growing number of examples of state-level engagement. England was the first. In 1997, the Blair government, when first elected, designed an integrated strategy that combined "pressure and support" to focus on literacy and numeracy. There was a strong accountability emphasis, but at the same time there was a major orchestrated strategy to increase the capacity of teachers and school principals to work together to achieve new levels of student attainment. The outcome was impressive, although it raised additional questions with respect to going deeper.

On the impressive side, large gains were achieved. Using 11-year-olds as the marker, 62 percent were at proficiency levels in literacy in 1997; for numeracy, the figure was 61 percent. By 2002, the scores had reached 75 percent for literacy and 73 percent for numeracy. This represents a remarkable accomplishment, because the whole system moved forward, representing some 20,000 schools. All this within one election period—less than four years!

Tbe problem was that the gains leveled off or plateaued by 2001. The scores in 2001, 2002, and 2003 were identical. The initial highly centrally driven but very supportive strategy was effective—but only to a point. To go beyond the plateau requires a deeper strategy in order to gain the "hearts and minds" of teachers and principals. This is not straightforward, because the additional gains must be real and achieved on a large scale in the system as a whole.

The plateau problem notwithstanding, large systems are now becoming self-consciously engaged in accomplishing large-scale reform. England, as we have seen, has been significantly successful. More recently, Ontario, Canada; South Australia; and Washington State are all explicitly focusing on tri-level reform strategies in which the goal is to develop each level and their inter-relationships.

In summary, we need more examples where entire systems are actively engaged in tri-level reform—where the criterion of success is large-scale engagement and development of all three levels, with the outcome being continuous improvement through raising the bar and closing the gap of student performance. We have a strong start with a few good examples, but they are very much in the minority. The next phase of reform requires all three levels to co-develop in concert. Otherwise, we will not get large-scale—let alone sustainable—reform.

Leadership

Leadership is to this decade what standards were to the 1990s, if you want large-scale, sustainable reform. You can get some improvement by tightening standards, but only to a point, as we have seen in England. In order to get deeper change, you have to capture the energy, ideas, and commitment of teachers and principals. It takes leadership—a certain kind of leadership—to do this.

Culture of Change

In *Leading in a Culture of Change* (Fullan, 2001), I examined an equal number of successful cases in business and education, and asked the question, Does leadership across these two sectors have anything in common when it comes to success? The answer is a strong "yes." The reason is that all successful organizations in complex times are "learning organizations" and, as such, have certain core attributes in common, especially when it comes to leadership. The leadership in my study had five central characteristics: a strong sense of moral purpose, an understanding of the change process, well-developed relationship skills (emotional intelligence), a capacity to facilitate knowledge sharing, and an ability to help the group achieve coherence and connectedness. These leaders also had a high degree of energy, enthusiasm, and hope. They were energetic, but, more than that, energizing. In fact, the single most important characteristic of effective leaders is that they create energizing environments.

Change requires extra energy and the motivation to work through the complex difficulties of reform. Energizing leaders make this work possible. It is not hard work that tires people out, but rather negative work. Hard work that yields positive results relative to a highly important goal can be energizing, and this is the kind of environment that effective leaders cultivate.

Good to Great

Another confirmatory leadership study is Jim Collins' *Good to Great*. Collins and his colleagues conducted research on 1,435 Fortune 500 companies. All the companies by definition were good, but a smaller number were especially good or great as measured by 15 years of sustained economic growth. Collins' book is about comparing leadership in the two sets of companies. Several major differences stood out.

Collins **first** makes the distinction between "effective leaders" who can catalyze commitment to vision and standards, and "executive leaders" who can build enduring greatness. To take an educational illustration, the main mark of principals at the end of their tenure at a school is not just the impact on the bottom line of student achievement but equally how many good leaders they leave behind who can go even further.

Second, Collins found that leaders focus early on the "who" as much as the "what." He uses the metaphor, "How do you get the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats."

Third, great organizations "confront the brutal facts"; i.e., they help the organization constantly focus on data and related evidence of how well they are doing, and use these data to inform action aimed at improvement. In education, "assessment for learning"—using student data for continuous improvement—is a similar phenomenon.

Fourth, when the first three forces combine they create a kind of "hedgehog effect" where the organization has great focus and pursuit of core goals.

Fifth, great organizations have a "culture of discipline." In education, professional learning communities are not just congenial but rather are demanding cultures. They engage in purposeful, disciplined inquiry in order to achieve extraordinary results. There is a great deal of support in these communities, but there are also high mutual expectations.

Finally, Collins found that great organizations do not depend on technology as a major driver but use technology in more integrated ways to accelerate progress.

In summary, the focus on leadership as a turnkey to sustainability is crucial. Great leaders help produce other leaders who can carry on and go even further. With such leaders, turnover is less of a problem. It is not turnover per se that is the problem but rather discontinuity of good direction. In collaborative cultures, turnover is used to the advantage to sustain and deepen reform.

Conclusion

Sustaining education reform is a complex endeavor. It has all the attributes of Heifetz and Linsky's (2002) "adaptive challenges." Technical problems, say Heifetz and Linsky, are ones for which current knowledge is sufficient. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are more complex and go beyond what we know. Heifetz and Linsky identify several properties of adaptive challenges.

- The challenge consists of a gap between aspiration and reality demanding a response outside our current repertoire.

- Adaptive work to narrow the gap requires difficult learning.

- The people with the problem are the problem and the solution.

- Adaptive work generates disequilibrium and avoidance.

- Adaptive work takes time.

In other words, the tri-level reform agenda involves adaptive work. Leadership in numbers of the quality described in this article is essential to tackle the challenges of sustainable reform. The challenge will be enormous, but the focus of the work is increasingly clear. We need not a few good leaders but leadership that in turn develops team-based leadership in others. The chances of making major differences in the lives of students have never been greater.

Michael Fullan is a recognized international authority on educational reform. He is the former dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto and has been recently appointed as special adviser to the premier and minister of education in Ontario, Canada.

REFERENCES

Bryk, A. & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in Schools*. New York: Russell Sage.

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to Great*. New York: Harper Collins.

Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a Culture of Change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey–Bass.

Fullan, M. (2005). *Leadership and Sustainability*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Fullan, M., Bertani, A., and Quinn, J. (2004). New lessons for districtwide reform. *Education Leadership*.V. 61. No.7, pp. 42–46.

Heifetz, R., and Linsky, M. (2002) *Leadership on the Line*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.