

**Tri-Level Development**  
**It's the System**

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Our recent work is based on two interacting assumptions. One is that in order for educational reform to be sustainable we must focus on tri-level development, namely, what has to happen at the school and community level; at the district level; and at the state level. The second assumption is that we need initiatives that deliberately set out to cause improvement at the three levels and in their interrelationships.

Both assumptions represent a 'systems' perspective. Many authors have called for 'systems thinking'. We see little evidence that systems thinking has led to systems action. Our call is for systems action that is strategic, powerful and pursued in practice. At this time, state level examples are few and far between. Most federal state policies focus primarily on accountability. They need instead to integrate accountability and capacity-building in a systemic manner. This means changes in the way that system leaders conceptualize the problem, formulate corresponding policies and strategies, and allocate resources. No Child Left Behind incidentally is a classic example of an accountability scheme which as yet has no grounding in the reality of capacity-building.

We are calling for live experiments where policy makers commit to tri-level development, learn from it, and go deeper. We are currently associated with four such examples, namely, England, Ontario, Canada, New South Wales, and South Australia. These are examples in which system leaders are deliberately and self-consciously pursuing tri-level development. As governments pursue this agenda they have an obligation to learn from and contribute to others elsewhere. Ontario, Canada for example has recently launched a major system-wide reform. Their policies and

strategies are being influenced by the lessons of the Blair government's experiences since 1997 in improving literacy and numeracy .

Our early work in this domain has generated eight guidelines for system leaders committed to sustainability.

### **1. Moral Purpose**

Moral purpose is the link between systems thinking and sustainability. You cannot move substantially toward sustainability in the absence of widely shared moral purpose.

The central moral purpose consists of constantly improving student achievement and ensuring that achievement gaps, wherever they exist are narrowed. In short, it's about raising the bar and narrowing the gap. It also involves treating people with demanding respect, and contributing to the social environment (e.g., other schools). We need governments that are serious about moral purpose, that constantly espouse it in the day-to-day reality of working with school systems; and that draw it out and reward it until a critical mass of leaders is in place to put it into practice.

### **2. Get the basics right**

The basics are literacy and numeracy in elementary and high schools. Despite a variety of reforms over many years, literacy performance in England remained stable for almost 50 years. One published report in 1996 reached the startling conclusion that the average levels of performance in literacy remained much the same since 1948. The first thing that governments need to do is focus intensely on the basics to overcome the awful inertia of past decades.

This will bring rewards across the system, not just in the basics. We know that benefits in literacy and numeracy flow to other cognitive areas like science. With a little effort they bring benefit to the arts and drama. The two-way relationship between cognitive and emotional development is well known. As the work unfolds one can get more and more ambitious about the connections. Above all, they underpin success in all school subjects in the future. Doing the basics is never-ending; doing them better and deep is the goal. The agenda for the immediate future involves raising the floor in literacy and numeracy, especially in those schools, districts, states, countries where performance is unacceptably low. It means raising the bar and closing the gap, until high standards really are being achieved as near universally as possible. In short, if you don't get the basics right there is little foundation for doing all the other things that matter.

### **3. Communicate the big picture while providing opportunities to influence it**

The advice to system leaders is to communicate, communicate, communicate. Written words are not enough. Lots of interaction will be required. By doing this leaders learn to sharpen and refine the message as they are pushed to become clearer, and to take into account objections and suggestions from the field. If they are connected with practice they also discover examples of local success that connect to the bigger picture. It's not just a question of explaining the big picture; it's a matter of actively and constantly seeking feedback, where necessary refining the strategy, and making the big picture come alive on the ground. As system leaders communicate they are being influenced by the responses they receive. The hypothesis is that as frontline practitioners understand and identify with the big picture, they increase their system thinking capacity and can

therefore contribute more. This involves three interrelated activities: (1) putting the underlying principles and strategies out there for public consumption; (2) establishing learning opportunities around these plans so that people understand their deeper meaning (it is especially important that people see their roles in the context of a bigger agenda, and not just as a fragmented cog); and (3) providing periodic opportunities to review progress in order to generate recommendations for revising policies and strategies.

#### **4. Intelligent accountability**

Intelligent accountability is a phrase used by David Miliband, former Minister of State for School Standards in England, and now Minister for the Cabinet Office. Intelligent accountability recognizes that there are two aspects to accountability and, despite a degree of tension between them, both have to be accomplished. One involves transparent, external accountability to the public and to government as the public's agency (sometimes called **assessment of** learning or summative assessment); the other concerns the use of data on student learning as a strategy for directly improving teaching and learning (called **assessment for** learning or formative assessment).

Governments typically over-emphasize assessment of learning at the expense of assessment for learning. Teacher unions often do the opposite. Surely it's time to agree that both are necessary. After all, assessment for learning is a vital high yield approach. Moreover, the methodology for developing this capacity is increasingly specific. There are now scores of teacher leaders, principals and district staff with whom we and others

are working who are increasingly proficient at using data collaboratively to improve results.

Similarly, governments do have a moral obligation to provide evidence to taxpayers and the users of public services of whether they are delivering the results that should be expected. They also need to be able to intervene across a system where results in priority areas are not good enough. Our view is that when they do intervene directly in classroom practice they should do so rarely, do it well, actively involve expert practitioners and draw powerfully on the evidence base. The dual goal is to increase capacity as you assure and inform the public. This is the way to both focus on and **get** results.

## **5. Incentivize collaboration and lateral capacity building**

You can't develop systems directly. Again we have a high yield strategy. Invest a little to help leaders to lead beyond their schools, and reap the benefit. Some forms of lateral capacity building occur within the school or within the district. System leaders can establish explicit expectations that these kinds of intra-organization professional learning communities are deep and valuable. The evidence suggests that lateral capacity-building works best when it has a clear purpose, a means of measuring whether progress is being made in achieving the purpose and a clear evidence-based definition of best practice to inform action. The key is not to enforce collaboration but to offer incentives which reward it.

Beyond this, system leaders have a special responsibility to foster and support cross-system networks where people across a region, state or country learn from each other. When done well this has significant payoffs for sustainability. First, people are able to learn directly from other practitioners. Second, people begin to identify with larger parts of the system beyond their narrow interest group.

## **6. The long lever of leadership**

The longest lever we have at our disposal is leadership - leadership at all levels; leaders who deliver results and leave behind a legacy of leaders who can go even farther. Leadership standards can help to orient leaders in the right direction and give them individual experiences and development but they suffer from an individualistic bias. The assumption is that if you produce enough individual leaders with the new desired characteristics then the system will change. Not so. Systems quickly blunt or socialize new members. This is why we need to work simultaneously on individual development and system change.

In addition to strengthening qualifications frameworks, systems should ensure that leaders and potential leaders have intensive opportunities **to learn in context** or on the job, with the help of a mentor or coach. Promote good leadership in all quarters of the system and everyone will be better off.

## **7. Design every policy whatever the purpose to build capacity too**

There is a major trap that system leaders fall into: they assume or are oblivious to whether capacity to implement given policies automatically follows the introduction of

supposedly good practice. Here the lesson is don't invest a lot of money up front if the capacity to use it effectively is missing.

The more positive version is to ask critical questions before introducing new policies. What capacities would it take to implement this policy? To what extent do these capacities exist in the system? And how can we promote greater capacity in the course of implementation? The natural bias of policymakers is toward short-term accountability rather than mid or long-term capacity building.

Every new policy then is an occasion to question current capacity and promote greater capacity in the system. So our proposal is to constantly assess capacity and promote it on every occasion. As citizens become increasingly demanding – and rightly so – in what they expect government to deliver with their money, so it becomes more and more important for governments to maximize the productivity of every dollar or pound they spend. If each investment is designed simultaneously to deliver a specified short or medium-term objective and greater capacity, then the productivity gain is immense. System leaders must focus simultaneously on short term and long term results.

In short, accountability and capacity go hand in hand and you have to invest consistently in both.

## **8. Grow the financial investment in education**

Some new investment is needed upfront, but after that this year's success is next year's new money. The public potentially wants to invest more in education because intuitively

people know that better education means more prosperity and well-being for everyone. But all too often, they are not confident that the investment will yield results. The new system thinkers are pleased to enter the quid pro quo world of delivering results in order to secure more resources. They are willing to take the risks, and to make the extra effort on the promise that success breeds success.

The culmination of the previous lessons in action is greater investment toward sustainability. It may not represent largesse in the short run, but the direction will be unmistakable. It is about working smarter not just harder; but it is also about accruing well-deserved resources that enable us to go deeper and further.

There you have it. Politicians and policymakers need to create the conditions for others around them to succeed. The good news is that we now have a small number of examples where tri-level development is being deliberately attempted. Progress is always made through the crucible of purposeful action where people learn from their own experience and from each other.