COMPANION PAPER 5
BUILDING A MORE RESPONSIVE SYSTEM OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

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The Problem

Our current work in educational change focuses on how to create large scale, sustainable reform. The goal is to “raise the bar and close the gap” of student learning for the vast majority of students. Using tightly focused strategies called “informal prescription”, we have seen success, for example in England, as literacy and numeracy reached 75% on the average for 11 year olds (Fullan, 2005). This is a remarkable achievement, but the new standard must be 90% or more.

In getting systems to change there are several inherent dilemmas when it comes to strategy. These include:

- Top down vs. Bottom up
- Accountability vs. Capacity
- Flexibility vs. Fidelity
- Exclusive vs. Inclusive
- Short term urgency vs. long term sustainability

The truth is that neither horn of a dilemma represents a viable solution for large scale, sustainable reform. We know that top-down strategies do not beget ownership; but bottom-up strategies produce small scale, non-sustainable change (a thousand flowers do not bloom, or some bloom but only for a season, and they are not perennial).

Systems heavy on accountability get narrow conformity at best and only for a short while. Investing in capacity building (strategies that attempt to increase the collective efficacy of a group to learn new skills and gain knowledge) does not seem to be realized on a large scale. Emphasizing accountability undermines ownership; promoting capacity building only works when capacities actually increase which does not occur and/or persist on a large scale.

When good practices get developed and identified, the dilemma is whether to emphasize their faithful implementation or to encourage flexibility, which if taken too far squeezes the essence out of the new ideas.

Strategies that are inclusive try to involve everyone, but fall short, while exclusive strategies (such as working with pilot programs) do not produce ownership.

Perhaps the most prominent dilemma concerns whether short-term urgency for results undermines the capacity for establishing the conditions for longer-term results; or whether a longing for the long run undermines short-term results and credibility in the eyes of the public.
These dilemmas are just that—dilemmas. And they call for both/and vs other/or thinking and strategies. To move us forward I recommend the “tri-level solution” along with some strategic guidelines. The end result is that we need to promote “system thinkers in action”, which leads to the realization that the only way to transform the system is to enlarge our sphere of experience. What this means will become clear as we identify the ideas and strategies in the next section.

The Tri-Level Solution

Figure one depicts the three levels. In essence we need changes within each of the “tris”—the school/community, the district, and the state; and especially across the “tris”.

Figure 1: Tri-Level Reform

The first level school-community requires establishing permeable professional learning communities at the school level. If we take Newmann et al (2000) as the starting point, we find that effective schools (even under the most difficult circumstances) develop a certain collective capacity of the full staff to make a difference in student achievement. The internal to the school capacity includes:

- Knowledge, skills and dispositions of teachers,
- Professional community,
- Program coherence,
- Resources,
- School leadership (Newmann et al 2000).

The research shows quite clearly that schools with collective capacity (i.e. strong professional learning communities) do achieve greater success because they focus continually on improving teaching and learning as it affects student achievement.

Two other factors stand out. First, schools that develop their collective efficacy also reach out to engage the community. It is as if they are confident enough to take the risk to consider the community as part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

The second finding, and this is a transition to the mid-level of our tri-level model—is that schools with high capacity are in the minority. Put another way, schools with high capacity did not get that way because the system (district and/or state) was “causing” capacity development in schools on a wide basis.

It is for this reason that we have begun to work with districts. The goal is to “raise the bar and close the gap” of student achievement in the district as a whole. In our work with various districts in different countries, we recently identified 10 lessons concerning district-wide reform. School districts, which evince district-wide success in improving coherence in the majority of schools, have the following capacities:
1. Internal leaders with a clear, driving conceptualization,
2. Collective moral purpose that extends to everyone,
3. The right bus (structure and roles at district and school levels),
4. Leadership and capacity building for those on the bus,
5. Lateral capacity building,
6. Deep learning for adults as well as children,
7. Productive conflict where differences are aired,
8. Demanding cultures,
9. External partners,
10. Growing financial investment over time (see Fullan, Bertani & Quinn, 2004).

In short, districts must become a driving force, for district-wide reform, and they do this by having a strong moral and conceptual basis for the strategies they pursue, such as the 10 just listed.

In the same way that schools will not establish or sustain learning communities if the district is not working on this agenda, districts cannot establish or sustain district-wide reform if the state is not actively pursuing this agenda.

In a recent article, Michael Barber and I outlined 8 principles that the state must embrace if it is to promote large-scale sustainable reform. These are:

1. Moral purpose,
2. Get the basics right,
3. Communicate/reshape the big picture,
4. Intelligent accountability,
5. Incentivize collaboration and lateral capacity building,
6. The long lever of leadership,
7. Design every policy to build capacity too,
8. Grow the financial investment (Barber & Fullan, 2005).

Most states have not been able to incorporate both accountability and capacity building; nor have they been able to develop new two-way relationships with the field. In addition to standards of accountability and corresponding data on student achievement, states must redefine their relationship with the field, so that new ideas are constantly being generated, and that new motivation and commitment develop. This is difficult, but the bottom line for large scale, sustainable reform is widespread engagement.

In terms of the 8 principles, the state must foster continuous attention to moral purpose—“raising the bar and closing the gap” for all learners in the state. Second, getting the basics right—literacy and numeracy—must be non-negotiable. Third, the agenda (vision, strategies etc.) must have a core focus, and be easily communicated. More than that, this bigger picture needs to be the subject of discussion and debate so that it can be reshaped and refined as it evolves in practice.

Fourth, intelligent accountability involves balancing state-wide requirements with school and district-wide self-appraisal. There needs to be some degree of devolution to allow necessary flexibility at the local level which should operate within and be connected to state priorities. A one size fits orientation does not work, nor does “letting a thousand flowers bloom” approach - a point to which I return in the conclusion. The goal is transparent accountability, which is not onerous but targeted to improvement with local schools and districts building their own capacity through self-evaluation and related action plans.
Fifth, one of the most powerful recent strategies is lateral capacity building, where the state invests in and facilitates focused networks that learn from each other, as they implement priorities in the context of state policies. England for example, has established a Primary Strategy Learning Network, in which 1500 networks of around 6 primary schools each, learn from each other with respect to improving literacy and numeracy. The second English example is the new School Improvement Partner (SIP) program where all schools in the country will have a trained and supported SIP, the vast majority of whom are current or recently retired principals.

The long lever of leadership consists of policies and practices that provide a pool and pipeline of school leaders. Two things stand out in our work. One is that we need to redefine quality leaders as those that work to improve the bottom line of student learning, while at the same time develop leadership of those around them. The other key finding is that leadership is best learned “in context”. Put another way, changing the culture of the system and learning as you go must be built into the day-to-day learning of leaders. Qualifications’ frameworks are valuable, but they represent only about 30% of the solution. The remainder of the solution must be built into the culture of the school and district.

Principle seven - design policy to include capacity building is a reminder that most states pass new policies without attending to the capacities required for them to be successful.

Finally, growing the financial investment represents another dilemma. Problems do not get solved by throwing money at them, yet new capacities require new resources. The general idea is to invest new money up front in the first year or two, and then to have, so to speak, next year’s success, be the following year’s additional money. The investment does grow, but only if success accompanies it. A word of caution - improved student learning does not increase in a linear fashion. It goes through step changes - moving up for a few years, and then plateauing requiring deeper strategies to enhance the next step change. (see Fullan, 2005)

Conclusion

We are currently engaged in a tri-level learning network involving five states (England, New South Wales, Ontario, South Australia and Washington State). In these cases, the tri-level model is being pursued. Since large scale, sustainable reform is complex and dilemma-ridden there are no solutions in advance. We do, however, know how to approach tri-level development. Figure two represents the overall lens. It means that not only must all three levels develop, but they must develop in concert. It means also that people at any one level, must not only be more engaged in the dynamics at their own level, but must interact with and have greater understanding of the other two levels. This applies to all three levels. It amounts to greater rapport with and empathy across levels - not false harmony but critical engagement.

Figure 2: Enlarging Your World

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The ideas in the previous section contain the elements of a strategy that enables the system to better manage inherent dilemmas including:

- How to balance system requirements, standards and accountability with opportunity for flexibility at the local level,
- How systems at the central and district level need to operate to best support schools to achieve high standards,
- How schools and systems work together to achieve higher learning,
- How to foster leadership that facilitates system thinking in action, and improves the culture of the system as a whole across the three levels.

In summary, the solution to large scale, sustainable reform requires a new relationship between the state and local schools and districts. This relationship requires mutual engagement and mutual influence. There will always be elements of tension between state policy and local needs, especially in relation to how to go about making improvements.

To be more specific to the New South Wales situation, one can think of systems in terms of how they need to operate in a simultaneous loose-tight manner. If systems are too loose, it would be necessary to tighten up for greater focus. By contrast, if a system is too centralized it would be necessary to redress the tight-loose balance. This paper is not a direct analysis of NSW, but I believe that it is accurate to say that the system is too centralized in relation to the criteria that are contained in this paper. It will be up to NSW to decide on the particular implications of this line of analysis, but the gist of the needed new direction can be outlined. The combination needed is as follows:

1. Some devolution of authority to local schools with respect to operational issues, concerning, for example, aspects of staffing and budget. At the same time devolution means greater flexibility in designing strategies for reaching goals (again one size does not fit all), although as I say in point three such strategies must be based on clusters of schools working locally and regionally, not on individual schools working in isolation.

2. Such devolution would work within a framework of state priorities. The tightness or accountability function would be achieved through building up transparent self-appraisal school plans which would be based on state policy priorities, and would be supported and monitored by district and regions.

3. Within this same approach it has become clear that schools need to learn from each other - what we call lateral capacity building. Thus devolution does not mean school isolation. State and regional strategies, and commitments of local schools must include working with other schools to learn how to maximize improvement. Two things are accomplished with this strategy both of which counter the isolating tendencies of devolution: one is that as schools learn from each other best practices are identified and retained representing convergence in the system toward evidence-based practices; the other is that the more that people interact the more that there is a we-we versus we-they commitment. Greater shared commitment to improving the system is generated.

In brief, focus is retained through the emphasis on state frameworks and policies and through monitoring of results, and flexibility is increased with respect to the means of how local contexts and processes can be best positioned to move the particular localities forward. Lateral capacity
building is also a “coherence-maker” as people learn from each other and consolidate around best practices and newly developed shared commitments. What NSW needs and would get from such an approach is greater rapport between localities and the center (a greater we-we versus us-them identity), and greater shared commitments laterally as schools and clusters of schools interact with a focus on improvement.

The purpose of my comments in this paper is to suggest new directions as clearly as possible realizing that it is the NSW system that would need to work out and decide on the particulars. My suggestions are broadly congruent with the recent conclusions of OECD (2004) in its analysis of the characteristics of the five highest performing countries in the PISA study (Canada, Finland, Japan, Korea, and Sweden), although I caution that the devil is in the details and must be contextualized to fit the needs NSW as it is in 2005.

Progress will be made in any system when all three levels realize that they need each other, and begin to experience the benefits of interacting in new ways. Using the principles I have outlined above can result in initial success in relatively short order within a two-year period. The idea is to break with the status quo, create new momentum and then build on it. The only caution is that success is not linear. It typically involves step changes where one plateau is achieved, requiring new and deeper strategies to move to the next step change. The good news is that capacity begets capacity. More can be accomplished with less effort because collective effort and ingenuity gets stronger. For the first time in the history of educational reform, we have an opportunity and possibility of changing the entire system for the better.
References


