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School Britannia

Prime Minister Tony Blair has spent eight years applying shock therapy to state-run schools in England, relying on the skills of Canada's Michael Fullan to keep the massive changes from bringing the system to its knees. ALANNA MITCHELL crossed the Atlantic to watch the renowned educator in action. Now that he's a special adviser to Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty, she also enjoyed a preview of the overhaul Canadian classrooms can expect

By ALANNA MITCHELL

Saturday, May 1, 2004

UPDATED AT 11:46 AM EDT

NEWPORT, WALES -- Michael Fullan is pacing the stage at Celtic Manor, a five-star luxury resort. A conference for 200 of the best and brightest head teachers at schools in Bristol, just over the English border, is about to begin. He has his hands in his pockets and a mike affixed to his shirt. The house lights are low and the backdrop dances with pastel beams.

It's a tough crowd. One head teacher (in Canada he would be called a principal) walks in and snorts: "What's this, the Oscars?"

Not a bad guess. In some quarters, Prof. Fullan is a star -- an internationally respected educator whose theories have been at the forefront of the massive reforms that have rocked Britain's state education system since Tony Blair came to power eight years ago. In effect, the professor is the Prime Minister's education guru.

He is also a Canadian, until last year dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, and something of a prophet embraced everywhere except at home.

But that's about to end. Last week, Prof. Fullan was appointed special education adviser to Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty. The reforms he has inspired and helped to implement in Britain are coming soon to Canada.

He is in Bristol because, while most English schools have risen to the reform challenge and improved dramatically, those in this city of 400,000 in southwest England have not. They are under great pressure to perform, but now the dynamic new director of education, John Gaskin, has just announced that he is leaving in June. Instead of helping the Bristol schools catch up, he is taking a job in the private sector.

In a bid to revive its fortunes, the local education authority has brought in the enigmatic Canadian for "Michael Fullan Week." Last year, he injected energy and hope into the flagging spirits of Bristol's head teachers; expectations are high that he can do it again.

Prof. Fullan, 63, makes light of his mystique ("People only call me a guru because they can't spell charlatan"). But his approach to managing major change has been so appreciated that Mr. Blair thanked him personally and whispered his name in Mr. McGuinty's ear.

As well, a Fullan-led team of Canadians last year published a formal evaluation of the reforms this far and is helping to shape their second phase, having beat out other high-profile international academics eager to conduct the review.

All this has led to a grand tour of Britain for Prof. Fullan, whose seminars for thousands of key educators every year have created groupies able to quote his work from memory and keen to recall the time they have spent with him.

Canada doesn't have the problems that plagued Britain for 50 years before Mr. Blair took office -- low standards across the board, low international scores in reading and math, a low percentage of the population with a postsecondary education and universities reserved mainly for wealthier students.

Nevertheless, academics, parent lobbyists and think tanks have been pressing for fresh policies that can move Canadian education into the 21st century. Something meatier and more coherent than the "restructuring" in Alberta and Ontario that saw millions removed from education budgets while teachers were told to do better.

Mr. McGuinty's announcement is the first sign that innovation may be front and centre in a way Canada's biggest school system hasn't seen for two generations, since the reforms of premier Bill Davis.

What will the future look like? The goal is something even better than what's happening in Britain, where Prof. Fullan helps to bring about the change, not decide what it will be. In other words, he'll take the best and leave the rest.

One reason the British have poured so much energy into education reform lies about an hour's drive across the Bristol Channel bridge from the Celtic Manor resort. School of Christ the King Primary is located in a south Bristol neighbourhood so dodgy that the pub a few blocks down the road has been boarded up because the police say they can't guarantee its safety.

Children routinely enter their "reception year" -- kindergarten -- unable to count to 10. They can't figure out where to hang their coats because they can't recognize their own names next to the hooks on the wall. Some have never been shown a book and can't distinguish colours or shapes; others have no idea how to use a toilet. But they can describe in harrowing detail how to shoot up with heroin.

Jordan Lee Williams, wan and underfed like some Dickensian waif, is only 11, but has already seen his share of trouble. Expelled from another school, he is apt to flee this one at the first sign of trouble even though he prefers Christ the King. "It's got a better playground," he confides, barely making eye contact as he clears away dishes from the school lunches, a rare bout of helpfulness that the teachers reward with praise.

Like most pupils, he is a child of "the estates," the blocks of subsidized housing members of Britain's working class have inherited in place of jobs.

His father is in jail. His 13-year-old brother and the crowd he runs with collect school expulsions like badges of honour. They run free on the streets, which can't help but appeal to young Jordan Lee. His life is far from stable and likely to become less so as he gets older.

For decades, children like him have been considered unteachable, largely because they were expected simply to put up with school until leaving at 16 for a labouring job. Education was quaint and sometimes troublesome, but more a curiosity than a ticket to something better.

In today's England, that doesn't wash. Those heavy-lifting jobs aren't there in big numbers any more. And for the sake of the country's economic health and domestic peace, educators now need the Jordan Lees to make good.

In fact, it is on their frail shoulders that Mr. Blair's promise to the nation rests.

Newly elected in 1997, he told voters that his top three priorities were "education, education, education." He vowed that Britain would rise from the middle of the pack in international testing scores and that, rather than just for the privileged few, it would offer quality education for all.

"The British record is bloody awful," says Labour Party MP Barry Sherman, chairman of the Commons' influential all-party education and skills select committee. "If you live in the poorest part of town, you get the poorest education. Tony believes very firmly and passionately that education is the key to liberation."

When Mr. Blair came into office, about 60 per cent of 11-year-olds had good reading skills. Today, it's 75 per cent -- a stunning improvement. But recently the progress has stalled and Mr. Blair wants more. For that to happen, his reforms will have to reach the true hard cases, children from socially deprived neighbourhoods like the ones surrounding School of Christ the King.

The key, Mr. Blair and his team have decided, is to replace the carrot with the stick a bit, to raise the bar instead of expecting less because of the students' difficult circumstances at home.

"We're very clear that's no excuse," says head teacher Anne Peachey. "We're always striving to get better and better."

Back at the Celtic Manor ballroom, Prof. Fullan is showing the crowd a highly polished PowerPoint presentation. The crowd is restive despite the jars of sweets and bottles of fizzy water on the tables. Their boss is in the crowd, but they know he is leaving soon and they are sick of forever being pumped up only to be deflated again.

Still, they give Prof. Fullan a good listen, not only because he is so famous but because the show has been pretty entertaining. Some Monty Pythonesque jokes delivered by a fellow head teacher were almost as witty as the background music specially chosen for the occasion, from Love's 1967 anthem *Forever Changes* to the Pink Floyd classic *Marooned*.

It's also one of Europe's more posh resorts with single rooms running \$625 a night -- not a bad place to be wooed. And Prof. Fullan's message is well polished. It's his job to motivate them and, after 30 years, he is the acknowledged leader in his field, in Australia, Hong Kong and continental Europe as well as Britain and North America.

His main message is that change must happen with a delicate balance of pressure and support. That means: Give students and teachers every possible tool to raise standards and make them bear the consequences if it still doesn't work.

The other key: Standards must rise at the same time as the gap between poorest and best students narrows. In other words: This is not improvement just for some.

"We're talking about a very, very serious scholar," says David Hopkins, director of the standards and effectiveness unit in the British Department for Education and Skills.

He earned his doctorate in education under Prof. Fullan, and says he has tried to style himself as "England's Michael Fullan." His mentor's genius is his ability to turn scholarship and theory into action, to boil down abstractions into pithy statements that inspire teachers.

For example: "Empathy is getting along with people you don't like." Or: "Anger can be redefined as frustrated hopes." Or even: "Change is a planned journey on uncharted waters with a leaky boat and a mutinous crew."

Even better, he can simultaneously acknowledge how much pressure they are under and poke fun at it. "Ten years ago, if I'd had a vision, they would have

locked me up," he reassures them. "Now, you can't get a job without one."

This is why teachers flock to his seminars. Mrs. Peachey of Christ the King confides that a colleague in Bristol has counted 35 new policies in the past 18 months. Faced with change at this pace (Prof. Fullan calls it "projectitis" or "initiative overload"), those on the front line need a way to cope.

Britain and Canada have some obvious differences. For one thing, education is a national responsibility in Britain, but fiercely guarded provincial turf in Canada. And Canadians are not primed for the drastic nature of the English reforms. But the real difference, according to Prof. Fullan, is psychological. In Britain, education has so "captured the imagination" of the public and the government as a way to help the country get ahead that the feeling is "palpable."

Billions have flowed into the school system, whose share of the nation's gross domestic spending is 60 per cent higher than under the previous government. In March, Charles Clarke, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, announced that this spending will grow another 6 per cent next year and 7.1 per cent over the two years following that.

Schoolteachers can earn more than college professors. In the past two years, the government has bought 23 million new books and recently announced it will pump billions more into building beautifully designed modern schools across the country. Bristol alone now spends £186-million a year on education versus about £130-million before Mr. Blair was elected -- a jump of 43 per cent.

Even the real estate occupied by the education apparatus says something: The department has expansive new quarters around the corner from Westminster Abbey, with another key bureaucrat across from Buckingham Palace, not far from the office of Michael Barber, the man the Prime Minister chose to come up with the changes Prof. Fullan is helping teachers make.

Drawing on research from around the world, Prof. Barber created the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, credited with improving reading and math scores. Not surprising, the core strategies just announced for Ontario come with a secretariat for literacy and numeracy.

Each primary-school child in England now has a structured hour every day both in reading and math. Each 15-minute segment is devoted to a specific task, ending with a 15-minute summary of what the children are to have learned. The structuring is so tight, says head teacher Tony Halloran of Fonthill Primary School in Bristol, that "if it is a Thursday in February, you will have reached this point in maths."

None of this is left to chance. A robust staff of inspectors has the authority to make sure the lessons are being taught appropriately.

There is a growing feeling among teachers, bureaucrats, academics and even Prof. Fullan's international review team that English schools are ready for more flexibility and creativity -- fun, in fact -- but Prof. Barber is not convinced. Until teachers live and breathe the new system, he is not sure they can move to the next step of what he calls "faithful implementation."

Yet he expresses no doubts about his Canadian collaborator. Prof. Fullan "is probably the most influential researcher on our system. He's definitely learned a lot, and we've learned as much from him. It's been a very productive, symbiotic relationship."

Back at the wood-panelled Welsh ballroom, it's time for the teachers to talk -- and for Prof. Fullan to play father confessor. Why, he asks, aren't the changes working very well in Bristol? Various suggestions trickle out until finally a reason emerges: People are afraid.

Not just because Mr. Gaskin is leaving and they wonder who will succeed him, and not just because the government has Bristol in its sights. They are afraid because the new system puts their careers on the line. They are told what to

teach and when, and subjected to rigorous review to see how well they are doing it. Coasting is not an option.

In fact, a special agency known as Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) employs thousands of people to compile detailed reports and rankings for England's 24,000 publicly funded schools and the local bodies that oversee them, as well as daycare centres, nursery schools and classes for those 16 to 18.

Ofsted inspections are the stuff of legend, if not nightmare. They have been blamed for the deaths of several teachers and school officials -- called "Ofsted martyrs" by the Times of London. Even those who are competent quake when the Ofsted legions descend on a school at inspection time.

The rankings that result, plus national test results, are known as "league tables" and let each school know exactly where it sits in relation to every other school. If a school doesn't come up to snuff, it is put into what's called "special measures" and will be closed if it doesn't improve.

Tony Halloran's Fonthill is, like School of Christ the King Primary, a creature of the estates, and its national ranking is in the bottom 5 per cent. Many more children than average have learning problems and there are very high levels of social deprivation. Its students, he says, are "from the rough end of the back of beyond."

Although relaxed and genial, Mr. Halloran was recently threatened by a student wielding a brick. He stayed out of range and called the police. The kid was 9.

But the school is doing well, despite its ranking. Teaching is vibrant and the mood is great. Pupils who start in the nursery school with few social or school skills at all do reasonably well by the time they move on at 11, compared with other schools in such deprived circumstances, and probably better than they would do at schools not so used to dealing with these issues. There's lots to celebrate.

Mr. Halloran recently went out on a limb and took a group aged 10 and 11 to the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden in London.

A bunch of other children from rich London schools were there too, cranky because they had to sit through yet another cultural event. The kids from Fonthill were breathless with excitement. Most had never been to London before, let alone seen a ballet. It was, Mr. Halloran says, one of the great experiences of his teaching life.

And this illustrates what Prof. Fullan is trying to do here, and will ultimately do in Canada: show that change is messy. It requires leaders who can take a vision and shape it into something practical that works and then share it with others.

More than that, he keeps gently reminding his audience, it's all worth it because the children are the truly important ones. "Nobody," he points out, "likes change -- but a wet baby." Everybody should remember that and move on.

As the day comes to an end, Prof. Fullan goes into "closure" with the group, preparing them for an evening of feasting, spas and music. They leave not fully cheered up. It's not completely clear whether Michael Fullan Week is the resounding success everyone prayed for. But there are more seminars tomorrow, and he promises that he will be back in June to do it again.

As the head teachers file out of the ballroom, another puckish piece of old rock music bounces off the walls: *Everybody Hurts*, by R.E.M., a mournful plea to hold on even when things look bleak.

Alanna Mitchell is a senior feature writer with The Globe and Mail.

THE REFORMS ONTARIO WANTS

Math and literacy

Prime Minister Tony Blair's key promise was that more children would be good at reading and math by high school. Major gains on both fronts have been attributed to the fact that elementary students spend an hour a day on each. Last week, Premier Dalton McGuinty announced a "dedicated literacy hour and math time each day" for Ontario, as well as a new literacy and numeracy secretariat to make sure the tactic works.

2. Lead teachers

Each elementary school will have staff specially trained in reading and math instruction, based on the best research and most effective techniques.

3. Extra resources

Struggling students will receive added help, such as tutors before school, during lunch and after school, plus crack "turnaround teams" dispatched to schools in need.

4. Testing

It's the best way to see who really needs help.

5. Parental help

Provide them with extra help to support early reading at home.

6. Share

Spread the news when strategies work.

7. Commitment

Ensuring the desire for reform comes from the highest levels and filters down to school boards, principals, teachers and every child.

8. Done at 11

Agreeing that by this age a child should have reached a high level of reading and writing.

9. Set goals

Mr. Blair wanted 85 per cent of 11-year-olds to be good at reading and math. Mr. McGuinty is calling for 75 per cent to reach the Ontario standard by 2008. Today, the figure is just over 50 per cent.

10. Spend

You don't get something for nothing.

WHAT DIDN'T MAKE THE GRADE

1. Inspections

Britain inspects everything. There is even Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, who is regularly grilled by a Commons committee. Professor Michael Fullan doesn't see this model working for Ontario "in the foreseeable future. It's much more gentle here."

2. Adversarial approach

Things have since changed, but England started by taking everyone to task. Mr. McGuinty has made it plain that he wants an era of co-operation in which educators share ideas instead of "shuffling paper."

3. Arts bias

The single-mindedness of the reforms led to criticisms that culture had been left off the agenda. Mr. McGuinty says all students should have "significant exposure to music and the arts."

4. Shallow Hals

Critics have attacked England's decision to focus firmly on the nuts and bolts of learning rather than on critical thought. Mr. McGuinty pledges his students will be able to "think and communicate with a high degree of critical analysis."

-- *Alanna Mitchell*



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