

## The Tri-Level Solution School/District/State Synergy

It has become increasingly clear that sustained school improvement requires a system solution - one that is at the same time practical and effective on a large scale. That solution in my view is within our grasp; it is what I call the tri-level solution.

The tri-level solution focuses on total system transformation through the conscious, deliberate, reflective actions of the state in tri-level capacity building within a framework of accountability.

The school/community is the first of these levels; the district or region is the mid level; and the state or policy level is the third. This column comments briefly on the first two, but the main message is aimed at the third level.

Capacity building is defined as actions that lead to an increase in the **collective power** of a group to improve student achievement, especially by raising the bar and closing the gap for all students. Capacity building synergizes three things: new skills and dispositions; enhanced and focused resources; new and focused motivation or commitment. One can think of capacity building at any of the sub-levels, but here I am stressing the overall tri-level capacity of the system.

### School Capacity

We know a fair amount about capacity building at the school level with one exception noted below. We know for example, that developing professional learning communities within schools makes a significant difference in student learning. Newmann (2000) suggests school capacity increases collective power to improve student achievement through these components:

- skills, dispositions of individuals
- professional learning communities (the quality of relationships among teachers and between teachers and the principal)
- program focus and coherence
- focused and enhanced resources
- principal/school team leadership

The part that we know less about is the role of parents and community. Societal engagement accounts for a large percentage of the variance in student achievement and is the least developed of all the major factors in most jurisdictions. Finland, for example, currently leading the pack in the OECD PISA results, has particularly strong societal engagement in the development of children and youth.

Another important observation about the first level is that we cannot claim that school capacity, when we do find it, is **caused** by the infrastructure i.e., the district or the state. What does cause it in most cases is "luck" or "serendipity". In other words, along comes a great principal; good teachers are attracted to work in this environment; they have great chemistry and the group gels. When school capacity is a matter of serendipity, it will never occur on a large scale (more than 15-20%), nor will it last beyond the tenure of one or two principals.

### District Capacity

For these reasons, school districts over the past decade have become engaged in district-wide reform. This has resulted, again in the minority of cases, in district-wide improvement where the majority of schools have experienced increases in student achievement in literacy and numeracy. This success is significant but not very deep (in relation to teaching for understanding and learning beyond literacy and numeracy), and it has not involved high school reform.

We recently set out 10 lessons of district-wide reform from our work and that of others. Effective districts have:

- Internal leaders with a clear driving conceptualization.
- Collective moral purpose.
- The right bus (structure and roles).
- Leadership development.
- Lateral capacity building (schools learning from each other).
- Deep learning.
- Productive conflict.
- Demanding cultures.
- External partners.
- Growing financial investments. (Fullan, Bertani, and Quinn, 2004)

Note, again the community is least developed in this work. District success is also a matter of serendipity - the right Director or Superintendent, the right Board, good people being attracted to work with each other. As before, we cannot claim that this district development is "caused" by the state. Thus, effective districts remain in the minority, and do not last beyond the tenure of two or so Directors and Boards.

### State Capacity

This brings us to the third or state level. Tri-level reform requires that state leaders recognize that system transformation won't happen unless the state takes responsibility for leading the way. This means that the very top elected and selected officials:

- immerse themselves in the knowledge base about change, capacity-building within a framework of accountability and as a result, start to think differently.
- act differently with respect to whom they appoint as leaders around them, what policies and strategies they formulate, and how they focus and enhance resources.
- radically redefine their relationship with the other two levels by being more transparent, more involved, modeling and leading capacity building at their own level, and helping to lead and facilitate co-determined solutions across the other two levels.

Of course, one could make the point that the third level may not be able to pursue this agenda if only elected for one or two terms. My response is that a capacity building agenda within an accountability framework results in success that is politically attractive to the public, leading to successive opportunities to do even more which is additionally politically valued. Not to mention that it is the right thing to do in terms of moral purpose.

### Implications for Policy

Neither carefully orchestrated top-down strategies or site-based management has brought about large scale reform. What we need instead are models of co-ordinated tri-level reform, learning from them as we go. I am involved in three such examples. After initial success in raising literacy and numeracy achievement

plateaued, England is now engaged in deliberations of how to go beyond the plateau. In my view, such movement will require the ingenuity of the tri-levels working together (Fullan, 2005,a). After ten years of "letting a thousand flowers bloom" with accompanying stagnation and decline of literacy and numeracy achievement, South Australia has been pursuing a tri-level solution since 2001. In October, 2004 Adelaide's daily newspaper, the Advertiser reported in a front page headline, *First Class Literacy*, that literacy and math scores increased significantly for the first time in a decade. Ontario, beginning in October 2003, is also in the midst of setting out a tri-level solution.

We can also learn from other successful jurisdictions such as Alberta and Finland. All these lessons must be understood in terms of how policies and actions alter all three levels and their interactions to unleash the moral purpose and pedagogical creativity of the collectivity.

### Beyond Serendipity

We are now in a position to learn from and build on these efforts, but it is going to take politicians and policy makers who embrace capacity building within accountability frameworks, and who are explicit about what they are learning and why. What is at stake is the possibility of sustainable reform, and a radically different system than we now have (Fullan, 2005,b).

### References

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