



CHANGE

is in the air



Connected talks to Michael Fullan, an expert on educational change and one of the keynote speakers at The Scottish Learning Festival 2007

Q What has been the focus of your work to date?

A I am a professor at the University of Toronto, and my role is as a special educational advisor to the Premier of Ontario, Canada. We make three main recommendations for improving the education system. Firstly, the Government must be strong on accountability, reporting and marking performance. Secondly, we must build capacity by helping teachers and principals to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for the improvement of teaching practices. It's about how to deliver leaders who can work together and learn from each other, as part of a professional learning community. Leading on from this, the final recommendation is for

partnership. There must be a sense of ownership and motivation; a sense of people wanting this. This is part of what I call the tri-level reform frame, which is made up of schools and communities, local education authorities (LEAs) and government. I advise the Government on how to put a strategy in place for partnership across all these levels. In Ontario we have achieved it, encompassing 72 LEAs, 4,000 primary schools and 900 secondary schools.

Q Your work takes you around the world – how have you brought your expertise to bear internationally?

A Everyone has been trying to change the education system in a positive way. The first example that springs to mind is England, under the leadership

of Tony Blair in 1997, which focused primarily on literacy and numeracy. The Premier of Ontario was inspired by this large-scale attempt and wanted to do something similar in 2003, which I was involved with. I'm now involved in Wales, encouraging strong partnerships between the 22 LEAs and the Welsh Assembly. I also continue to work in England. Last month I was in Asia, visiting Malaysia, Thailand and Hong Kong, where I was invited to introduce ideas to shift the focus to decentralised schools. I'm helping to put the training and resources in place to achieve that.

Q You're known as an expert in change – can you clarify what is meant by this?

A If you say “we want to improve the entire education system”, that's a change proposition. I bring the change knowledge – what it takes to get results on a large scale. I aim to provide direction plus flexibility. The history of educational change involves swinging from top-down reform (Government-led) to bottom-up reform (school-based management). The effect of the latter example is that some individual schools move forward and others don't. I recommend a policy of direction from the centre combined with bottom-up capacity-building.

Q Can you give us a taster of your speech at The Scottish Learning Festival 2007?

A Each May, I embark on a workshop tour of local authorities across the UK, so I have spent some time in Scotland. I see Ontario as a good comparison for Scotland, as it's not as top-bound as England is. I think there's a philosophical rapport there – Ontario is trying to move its whole education system forward, a goal that Scotland is also grappling with. Scotland shares many of our strategies and I certainly think the *Curriculum for Excellence* is moving in the right direction. My speech at The Scottish

Learning Festival 2007 will focus on the question of tri-level reform. It will be a challenging speech – I will point out that most nations don't have this right yet. I plan to pinpoint Scotland's strengths and challenges and take the risk of drawing some friendly conclusions. I will be drawing on the studies of McKinsey and Company, which under the guidance of Sir Michael Barber carried out an international study on the 20 best school systems in the world. I will ask what makes these systems so good, holding Scotland up for comparison, imposing questions and projecting responses on the quality of leadership in local authorities and the use of data on student learning to feed strategies. I want to link powerful strategies to real policies.



Q How valuable are international comparisons to moulding successful education systems?

A There are three main comparisons I believe all schools should make. Firstly, we want schools to look inwardly and compare with themselves. What's their starting point? Are they moving forward? Secondly is what I call a comparison of 'apples to apples' – ignore the league tables and look at the school's performance against schools similar to its own. Thirdly, schools should be measured against an international standard. How well are other countries doing? This provides another valuable mirror. One of the effects of the globalised world is that we must look at what everyone else is learning. The more a country looks at its own education system and draws comparisons the more aware it will be of how it's doing. Our global interdependence makes that increasingly important.

Q One of the biggest challenges facing the UK and many other nations is that of the 'NEET' agenda – people not in education, employment or training. What is your view?

A It's also something we focus on in Ontario. I think improving grades is only part of the solution. Academically, we must get the basics right, meaning literacy and numeracy. We know that if a 10-year-old is poor in literacy they're likely to drop out of school by the age of 16, so we must hook academic success on the basics. However there must also be a social solution to the problem. Do young people have a sense of belonging? As well as the academic focus on literacy and numeracy, there is a third basic in education, and that is wellbeing. In Ontario we have had success in our secondary school reforms by focusing on these three basics through the Every Child Matters policy. One part of this initiative involved embedding 'student success leaders' to re-engage pupils. By providing a caring adult who can take action we are increasing the personal connection within the impersonal system. The second aspect of our work in this area involved a change programme creating more relevant and diverse choices for our young people. Business and industry must work with schools and local authorities to personalise education around pupils' academic needs and their aspirations, making their progression relevant to them. The word that's pivotal here, and I suspect also in Scotland, is personalisation.

Interested in educational change?
Listen to Michael's full speech at The Scottish Learning Festival 2007 at 10.30am on 19 September. Visit www.scottishlearningfestival.org.uk for more information