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Commentary

The Fundamentals of Whole-System Reform

A Case Study From Canada

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[Image]

Charter schools, Teach For America, and the Knowledge Is Power Program may have their merits, but they are not *whole-system reform*. The latter is about improving every classroom, every school, and every district in the state, province, or country, not just some schools. The moral and political purpose of whole-system reform is ensuring that everyone will be affected for the better, starting on day one of implementing the strategy. The entire system should show positive, measurable results within two or three years. We have done this in Ontario, Canada, where we have had the opportunity since 2003 to implement new policies and practices across the system—all 4,000 elementary schools, 900 secondary schools, and the 72 districts that serve 2 million students. Following five years of stagnation and low morale, from 1998 to 2003, the impact of the new strategies has been dramatic: Higher-order literacy and numeracy have increased by 10 percentage points across the system; the high school graduation rate has risen 9 percentage points, from 68 percent to 77 percent; the morale of teachers and principals has improved; and the public's confidence in the system is up.

This work is by no means completed, but the number of elementary students at low literacy levels has fallen by 50 percent, and the number of schools with a large percentage of students not meeting the high provincial standard has been cut by 75 percent.

Whole-system reform means focusing on a small number of core policies and strategies, doing them well as a set, and staying the course by not being distracted. It must be politically driven by leaders at the very top, such as is the case in Ontario, with Premier Dalton McGuinty. But these leaders also must understand, embrace, and participate deeply in implementation by putting in place a set of fundamental whole-system-reform strategies. There are six fundamentals in particular, which we briefly outline here.

First, develop the *entire teaching profession*. The basic premise is respect for teachers and for professional knowledge, but this is accompanied by intensive development of the profession to a high standard of practice based on evidence. You cannot have whole-system reform unless all the teachers are working toward this goal. It is easy to get it

wrong. What is needed is a combination of labor peace and stability, and incentives for the entire profession to develop.

A combination of incentives must be used to attract, retain, and develop the teaching profession. We all know that the quality of the teacher trumps all other in-school factors. The challenge is to help tens of thousands of teachers get better at what they do. Performance pay for teachers may be intuitively appealing, but the evidence is clear: This is no way to develop the entire profession. In fact, it is counterproductive because it wastes energy on arguments about a policy that has yet to show significant overall results. Our six fundamentals end up improving the quality of instruction while putting effective pressure on the teachers who should not be teaching.

Second, focus on a *small number of ambitious priorities*, and set measurable, targeted, ongoing goals in partnership with each and every school and district. Our goals are literacy, numeracy, and high school graduation. The literacy and numeracy goals must include higher-order skills and connections to other parts of the curriculum, such as science and the arts, to avoid the curriculum's becoming too narrow and disengaging for students and teachers. High school reform requires a focus on keeping track of every student, on reducing failure rates, especially at the start of high school, and on improving instruction and assessment practices.

Third, a *two-way street between instruction and assessment* should be the centerpiece of a capacity-building strategy. Most school systems make the mistake of loading up on testing as the driver of reform. They install too many tests, too narrowly conceived, with punitive consequences—a recipe for failure. Good instruction should drive assessment as much as the reverse. Find and promote the best instructional practices linked to results. Keep instruction and assessment aligned and in balance.

A critical component of this third fundamental is the investment in strategies that help schools, districts, and the system at large learn about implementing effective change from schools already getting the best improvements. Ontario has several strategies in which schools do just that, zeroing in on instructional practices supported by research evidence and making it easier for people to learn about them. The prestige of the teaching profession is enhanced when it pursues with relentless consistency practices growing from a strong body of knowledge. Effective instructional practices are consolidated and new ones added through innovation and continuous improvement drawing on the best research.

The fourth fundamental recognizes that *distributive coordinated leadership at all levels of the system* is key. Effective leadership must be fostered throughout—from teacher leaders and school administrators, to district leaders, to state-level leaders. This cannot be accomplished by just having a set of leadership standards and practices that promote new leaders. Such an approach is too detached from the content priorities, and does not sufficiently work on changing the culture of the organization. Much of our direct leadership strategy focuses on the content implementation of the major priorities—literacy, numeracy, and high school reform. As people do this work, they also develop

their basic leadership skills that carry over into other priorities.

Fifth, establish a ***focused, mostly nonpunitive, comprehensive, relentless intervention strategy***. Again, this is counterintuitive. Common sense seems to dictate that if you want results on an urgent problem, you should be hard-nosed about it. The trouble is that this does not motivate people to bring about whole-system change. Building on the six principles in concert furnishes plenty of built-in pressure as well as support.

The Ontario strategy is laced with early and continuous intervention with individual students who are faltering, and with low-performing schools and districts. We have also done much work on improving the focus and capacity of the ministry of education (the state department of education). The result is twofold: greater internal accountability and more partnership and trust, which increase the likelihood that effective action will occur.

Sixth, ***use money to drive reform only in the service of the previous five fundamentals***. Otherwise, it will be squandered. Schools often seem to behave as if any new activity requires money. In fact, a main requirement is to use existing resources in a more focused manner. In the United States, there must also be some action to alter the gross imbalance of per-pupil expenditure with respect to rich and poor districts. Beyond that, funding strategies must be geared to supporting systemwide change, not individual, ad hoc projects.

Whole-system reform is possible, but it must be tackled directly. There are no single-factor solutions. By implementing a core of fundamental components, system leaders can get results in fairly short order, and build on those results for sustainable futures. The only way to get whole-system reform is by motivating and mobilizing the vast majority of people in the system.

We are not claiming that these six principles exhaust everything that has to be done. In Ontario, we are about to add deep strategies to improve early-childhood learning, as well as to address related nonschool factors pertaining to parents and the community. But we will implement these new strategies using the same six principles. Why? Because whole-system reform is our goal.

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