

MICHAEL FULLAN


# The BIG Ideas Behind

## WHOLE SYSTEM REFORM

I HAD BEEN WRITING IN THE 1990s ABOUT “TRI-LEVEL reform” – how schools/communities, districts, and governments could align their efforts for more comprehensive reform – but I had not had a chance “to do it or help do it” until Tony Blair’s literacy/numeracy large-scale reform initiative in 1997, when a team of us at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of the University of Toronto won the contract to evaluate England’s bold effort. The term “whole system reform” seems a better fit for this work, conveying the message that it is both comprehensive and cohesive. When Blair and his chief strategist, Michael Barber, set out to improve literacy and numeracy in Britain’s 20,000 primary schools, they focused their efforts on capacity building (professional development, leadership development, curriculum, and instructional resources) and reinforced the whole thing with interventionist accountability schemes.

In our evaluation, we reported two main outcomes: good news and bad news, so to speak. Student achievement did rise, by some 13 percent over a five-year period. Although there is some debate over the actual numbers, we considered the strategy to be a success in getting substantial improvement over a fairly brief period of time. The bad news was that this success came with a price – it was too top-down, too target driven, and too punitive. It was not a sustainable strategy, and indeed England’s gains leveled off.

Right on the heels of our final report in 2002 came the Ontario election. Dalton McGuinty was elected in October 2003 with a strong “improve education” platform. He appointed me his adviser, and we immediately implemented a strategy to transform the public system in Ontario, a system that had been stagnant in terms of student achievement for the previous five years. We took the best of the English strategy, jettisoned the weak parts (heavy targets, prescription from the top, and punitive accountability), and built our own brand of partnerships with the 4,000 elementary and 900 secondary schools in the province’s 72 school districts.

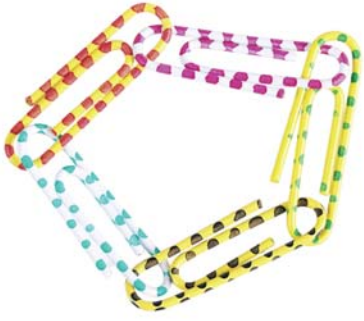


### EXHIBIT 1: Big Ideas for Whole-System Reform

- 1 All children can learn
- 2 A small number of key priorities
- 3 Resolute leadership/stay on message
- 4 Collective capacity
- 5 Strategies with precision
- 6 Intelligent accountability
- 7 All means all

**EN BREF** Par réforme globale du système, on entend que chaque élément vital – école, collectivité, conseil ou commission scolaire, gouvernement – contribue individuellement et ensemble au progrès et au succès, en utilisant les pratiques, plutôt que la recherche, comme locomotive de la réforme. Ainsi, plusieurs « grandes idées » fondées sur une mise en application réussie ont contribué à la stratégie de réforme ontarienne :

- Tous les enfants sont capables d'apprendre.
- Il ne manque pas d'innovation et d'initiatives, mais il y a trop de priorités fragmentées qui changent rapidement.
- Le succès de la réforme dépend d'un *leadership résolu*.
- Les *capacités collectives* constituent la ressource cachée que nous n'arrivons pas à comprendre ni à cultiver.
- Le succès dépend de l'aptitude à constamment dégager, maintenir et étendre des pratiques pédagogiques efficaces et précises.
- Il faut combler le besoin de responsabilisation par la transparence et en mesurant ouvertement les réalisations.
- *Tout signifie vraiment tout*. On ne peut résoudre le problème de la réforme globale au moyen d'efforts hétéroclites.



**Focusing on improving practice uncovers the best specific ideas. What you learn along the way can be tested in the light of broader research, but practice – not research – should be the driver.**

#### IDEAS BEHIND THE REFORM

Whole system reform means that every vital part of the system – school, community, district, and government – contributes individually and in concert to forward movement and success. The big ideas underlying the Ontario reform strategy are contained in Exhibit 1.

I have come to the conclusion that *practice drives theory*.<sup>1</sup> That is, focusing on improving practice uncovers the best specific ideas. What you learn along the way can be tested in the light of broader research, but practice – not research – should be the driver. With this in mind, the elements and insights discussed below were uncovered through implementation of these “big ideas”.

### 1 All children can learn

A lot of people pay lip service to the notion that all children can learn, but the breakthrough comes when children actually achieve gains that hitherto many did not think possible. Take, for example, Armadale and Crosby Heights elementary schools in York Region District School Board that Lyn Sharratt and I wrote about in *Realization*.<sup>2</sup> By implementing the seven big ideas in Exhibit 1, these two schools went from low morale and terrible performance to impressive success. Crosby Heights increased its reading, writing, and math proficiency scores – as assessed by the provinces' Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) – from 40 percent to 85 percent. Using the same strategies even more intensely, Armadale went from around 60 percent to 80 percent in a single year.

The main point here is that significant results can be obtained when the specific strategies are applied. But here is the change process insight: It is the actual experience and corresponding results that convince teachers that it can be done, not moral exhortation or mounds of evidence from other situations. The best energizer is actually accomplishing something significant and then building on it – what I call *realized moral purpose*.

### 2 A small number of core priorities

The problem in education is not the lack of innovation and initiatives but rather the presence of too many fragmented, piecemeal, rapidly changing priorities. This lesson is backed up by many examples, both negative and positive.

The objective of the entire Ontario strategy can be stated in a few words: broadly and deeply defined literacy and numeracy, and high school graduation, pursued through capacity building, with a focus on results. We could take a more specific example. Seven years ago the Ottawa Catholic District School Board announced “annual thrusts” which amounted to a dozen or so priorities that were altered every year. In 2003, the new Director, Jamie McCracken, reviewed the situation and announced that from that point on there would be three focuses – student success, staff development, and stewardship of resources; and that these goals would remain the same year after year. Today Ottawa Catholic is one of the top performing districts in the province.<sup>3</sup> They accomplished this by following the set of strategies that I am describing here.

### 3 Resolute leadership

Third, we are beginning to appreciate that successful schools, districts, and larger systems have *resolute leadership* that stays with the focus, especially during rough periods, and that these leaders cause others around them to be resolute as well. It is so easy to go off message; but if you do, you lose whole-system-reform possibilities. This is hard, persistent work, but it is not overly complex. Resolute leadership is critical at first, when new ideas encounter serious difficulty, but it is also required to sustain and build on success. All the situations of success that we know of were a result of leaders staying on message and problem-solving as they go.

Another insight that comes from this work: Successful leaders combine resolute leadership with impressive empathy. Again, good leaders persist, but they try to identify and understand what hesitations or objections people might have. This is impressive because their preference would be to get on with action, but they know that there might be legitimate issues to address. In other words, they pay attention to building relationships – even with those who are not so enthusiastic.

### 4 Collective capacity

Fourth, another big idea – which is not new but is very much underappreciated – is that *collective capacity* is the hidden resource we fail to understand and cultivate. Collective capacity building is at the heart of our strategies, and both our own evidence and that of the research literature confirm the power of this multifaceted strategy. Let's take the main components.

## Whole district reform depends on resolute leadership at the district level, which in turn develops collaborative capacity within and across schools.

The practice and research on collaborative school cultures and professional learning communities is very convincing. When teachers work together, led by an instructionally-focused principal, they are much more successful than when they work alone. We have already seen Armadale and Crosby Heights. Another convincing example comes from the longitudinal research on Chicago schools just reported by Tony Bryk and his colleagues.<sup>4</sup> They compared 100 elementary schools that had substantial success over the years with a matched sample of 100 schools that had stagnated or declined. The difference between the two groups boiled down to five factors: i) an instructionally focused principal, who in turn developed ii) strong parent and community ties, iii) professional capacity of teachers, iv) a student-centered learning climate, and v) instructional alignment and corresponding resources.

But there is more to collective capacity than intra-school collaboration. Whole district reform depends on resolute leadership at the district level, which in turn develops collaborative capacity within and across schools by helping schools learn in small clusters and networks. I have described four such examples in *All Systems Go* – Long Beach Unified District (California), Ottawa Catholic and York Region in Ontario, Tower Hamlets in London.<sup>5</sup> Rick Dufour documented a further ten examples,<sup>6</sup> and in *Motion Leadership the Movie* (in preparation) we have filmed nine examples in Canada, the UK, and the U.S.



Beyond the district level, we have invested in spreading practices across districts. One example is Ontario's "Schools on the Move" initiative, in which 150 successful schools have been identified and resources made available for others to learn from their experiences. In all of this, two strong change forces are unleashed. First and most obvious, by casting a wide net we increase access to effective practices. The second force is even more powerful; as schools learn from each other, their sense of identity and allegiance expands, spurring an even greater commitment to improvement. Along the way we have discovered an interesting twist, which we call "collaborative competition", in which networks of schools compete with each other to do better – all in a spirit of pursuing important moral goals.

### 5 Strategies with precision

Because the work is so grounded, and because the only route to success is to be more specific about the instructional practices that are most effective, the overall strategy is to continually identify, retain, and spread practices that are precise (i.e. effective teaching practices that can be specifically described and demonstrated.) (Ontario's Literacy, Numeracy and Student Success Secretariat's website is loaded with resources – print and video – that are proven to work.<sup>7</sup>) With precision, the *speed of quality change* can be greatly accelerated. Working on capacity building with specificity, within and across schools, is essential for whole system reform.

This is also a good place to spell out the high school reform strategy. Although it cuts across all categories, it is an initiative with great specificity in a field (high school reform) that has not demonstrated precision but has rather gone for broader structural innovations. The strategy, in brief, involves creating a new role called Student Success Teacher (SST) that has been funded centrally to all schools and districts. The work of the SSTs, with the principal and other school leaders and teachers, is to identify at-risk students prior to their arrival at the school and to provide individual support for every student.



In the first two years of high school, the support focuses on individual students' personal needs, the compulsory Grade 10 literacy test, and achieving the 16 credits that are expected by the end of Grade 10. In Grades 11 and 12, the emphasis is on program innovation to make the educational experiences more relevant and community/business-based. One of the most successful innovations has been the High School Majors (HSM) program, which began in 2006/07 and is based on forming packages of courses and internships in partnership with businesses and community groups in designated specialties (e.g., transportation, finance, health, tourism). Today more than 20,000 students are enrolled in over 740 HSM programs across all districts.

### 6 Intelligent accountability

The failure to get accountability right plagues all reform efforts. Andy Hargreaves unlocked the door to *intelligent accountability* when he observed that "accountability is the remainder that is left when . . . responsibility has been subtracted".<sup>8</sup> Intelligent accountability involves a set of policies and practices that 1) actually increases individual, and especially collective, capacity so that shared responsibility carries most of the weight of effective accountability; 2) makes internal and external accountability almost seamless; and 3) leaves external accountability to do its remaining, more-manageable task of necessary intervention.

Our Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) is a good case in point. The strategy consists of identifying poor performing and coasting schools and providing them with targeted support, all with a non-punitive, transparent, non-stigmatizing attitude. The 1,000 schools in OFIP (one-quarter of all schools) have improved at a faster rate than other schools. The key here is to focus transparently on what needs to be improved and to do so in a way that motivates and helps schools to improve. Most of the needs of accountability are addressed through the transparency and open measurement of achievement. Overt means of intervention are confined to more extreme cases.

### 7 All means all

Finally, *all* really does mean *all*. You can't solve the problem of whole-system reform through piecemeal efforts that try to get parts of the system improving in order to show the way. There must be constant reminders that all schools, and all districts, are part of the everyday focus of improvement.

These seven ideas represent the fundamentals of the Ontario strategy.<sup>9</sup>



## THE RESULTS

To get to the point quickly, since 2003 literacy and numeracy achievement results in Ontario have increased some 10-13 percent in the English school boards, and some 18 percent in francophone boards (EQAO provincial results). It is interesting to speculate that the francophone boards may have done better because there is more cross-district joint work (i.e. more collective capacity building). The strategy includes a focus on raising the bar and closing the gap for all significant subgroups, and a commitment to higher order problem solving and critical thinking skills. The work is not done, but the commitment to going deeper with even more precision is evident.

At the secondary level, the double focus on “personal care and connection” and on more relevant educational programs through the Student Success strategy is also paying off. High school graduation rates have steadily climbed since 2003 at about 2 percent a year and show no sign of abating, having gone from 68 percent to 79 percent.

Recently we have added early learning strategies, including full day integrated services for four- and five-year olds (7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and continuity in the summer). The program is being phased in with the first group of 600 schools (35,000 students) already selected to begin in September 2010.

In short, the goal is whole system reform, whereby learning is cumulative (ages 4-18), and comprehensive, covering all 4,900 schools and districts in the province. There is a very strong emphasis on instruction and personalized learning and on developing the individual and collective capacity among teachers and administrators at all levels to get the job done.

## IMPLICATIONS

Interest in strategies for whole system reform is growing and widespread, across Canada and throughout the world. I have been in most provinces in the past year discussing the topic at local and provincial levels. Ben Levin, Ken Leithwood, and I have an ongoing involvement in Alberta (which has led Canada in international achievement results over the past years). We are working with the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) in which some 30 districts (almost half of the total) are working on “Moving and Improving” the whole district, and with the Department of Education as it prepares its next phase of reform.


Internationally, interest is growing rapidly. Even the U.S., which historically has not been very interested in international student achievement results, appears to have become alert to the need to compete globally, as it contemplates the reality of having fallen from number one spot in the world in 1980 to its current position of number 24 or so. The international comparisons generated by studies like Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have led to an examination of how top performing countries achieve their results. The McKinsey group, led by Michael Barber and his team, will soon report on its analysis of how the “top 20 and most promising countries” get strong results. This study is distinctive because it looks beneath the results to examine the policies, practices, and strategies that are characteristic of the highest-performing jurisdictions.<sup>10</sup>

We can expect, then, an increased interest and focus on “whole system reform”. It is especially encouraging that the interest has moved beyond achievement results to policy and strategy questions. Learning how to bring about whole system reform – including “raising the bar and closing the gap” – is the practical, albeit big, question before us right now. Debating policy and strategy together represents a significant advance. The race now is to figure out how to get major improvements across the system by mobilizing educators, parents, students, and communities to engage in the collective efforts necessary for success. The next few years could represent a quantum jump in whole system reform initiatives as we all build on the most recent successes. **I**

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## Notes

- 1 M. Fullan, *The Change Leader* (San Francisco: JosseyBass, in press).
- 2 L. Sharratt and M. Fullan, *Realization: The Change Imperative for Deepening District Wide Reform* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2009).
- 3 M. Fullan, *All Systems Go* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press; and Ontario Principals Council, 2010).
- 4 A. Bryk, P. Bender-Sebring, E. Allensworth, S. Luppescu, and J. Esaton, *Organizing for School Improvement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
- 5 Fullan, *All Systems Go*.
- 6 R. Dufour, R. Dufour, R. Eaker, and G. Karhanek, *Raising the Bar: Closing the Gap* (Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press, 2010).
- 7 See also Sharratt and Fullan, 2009.
- 8 A. Hargreaves and D. Shirley, *The Fourth Way* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2009).
- 9 For a full discussion of the strategy see B. Levin, *How to Change 5,000 Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2008) and Fullan, *All Systems Go*.
- 10 The McKinsey report is not yet titled.




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