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| Abstract | Educational systems are known to be loosely coupled, fragmented, and overloaded with piecemeal initiatives. Under these conditions, there is a lot of room for inertia – things like to keep on doing what they are already doing. Yet, improvements in the performance of schools are badly needed. What forces could possibly and positively move whole systems toward substantial and continuous improvement? | |

# Positive Pressure

**Michael Fullan**

Educational systems are known to be loosely coupled, fragmented, and overloaded with piecemeal initiatives. Under these conditions, there is a lot of room for inertia – things like to keep on doing what they are already doing. Yet, improvements in the performance of schools are badly needed. What forces could possibly and positively move whole systems toward substantial and continuous improvement?

When we first turned out the phrase "pressure and support" in the early 1990s, it became an instant hit. People could pick whichever concept they were predisposed to like and give lip service to the other. Politicians in particular loved the pressure part. What should have been an integrated set became two pillars.

Now that we have much more experience under our belts, it is time to take stock and clarify what forms of pressure and support in combination are effective. To do this, I (1) stipulate two advance criteria; (2) consider bad or negative forces of pressure; (3) identify a core list of integrated elements of positive pressure; and (4) furnish a case example to show that these ideas can and are being embedded in reality.

The two criteria to judge effectiveness are as follows:

1. Is a given pressure or support action *motivational*? That is, does it cause people to put in the effort to get good results?
2. Do the set of pressure and support policies and actions address improvement of the *whole system*?

By "motivational," I do not mean that an action today will motivate people tomorrow, but rather if a particular action is taken with a degree of persistence it will incrementally and perhaps dramatically gain on the motivational problem.

Whole system is an entire state, province, or country. It is what we call "tri-level reform" – the school and community, the district, and the government. All schools. All children. Our question in this chapter is, why some forms of pressure

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work, while others don't? By "work," I mean that they motivate lots of people to change the whole system. One final foundational point: Inertia works because it is organic – nobody has to do anything for it to be effective. Negative pressure doesn't work because it is ad hoc or inorganic. Positive pressure will work when it becomes organically part and parcel of system functioning.

## Negative Forms of Pressure

To recall, negative pressure is ad hoc and extraneous to the system culture. To the extent that some forms of negative pressure are built-in they actually serve the forces of inertia. I take up five forms of negative pressure:

1. blind sense of urgency
2. pressure without means
3. punitive pressure
4. groupthink
5. win–lose competition

The more the system fails, the greater the blind sense of urgency. Kotter (2008) talks about this as a false sense of urgency:

> With a false sense of urgency an organization does have a great deal of energized action, but it's driven by anxiety, anger and frustration, and not a focused determination to win. . . With false urgency, the action has a frantic feeling: running from meeting to meeting, producing volumes of paper, moving rapidly in circles, all with a dysfunctional orientation that often prevents people from exploiting key opportunities and addressing gnawing problems (p. x).

This is a recipe for burnout and cynicism. It saps people's energy while they never learn what to do. People get discouraged and lose hope.

Along with a blind sense of urgency is mounting "pressure without the means" to act on it. This is pressure without a theory of action. It shows the failures and the goals but no way of getting there. It omits or gives lip service to "capacity-building" – how to build the individual and collective knowledge, skills, competencies, and motivation necessary to work on the problem.

Pressure without means can afford to have ridiculous goals. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in the United States is a prime example – well-intentioned with lofty goals (such as every child will have a qualified teacher by 2014 or every child will perform at a world-class level in literacy, math, and science, and so on) and without any strategy to get there, it becomes a fantasy. Fantasies left to rot become nightmares.

The more that blind sense of urgency and lofty goals without means prevail, the more the next bad step is likely to occur: tightening the screws with punitive pressure. Accountability with teeth, proponents say, is necessary to show people that we are serious. We will leave no child left behind because we say so, and we mean it.

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Punitive pressure is what most authoritarian regimes and individuals reach for when all else fails. It doesn't take a psychology graduate to know that punitive pressure doesn't work. It can work in narrow situations such as standing over a person's shoulder with a gun or its equivalent. But even this doesn't work if the person doesn't have the capacity to do what needs to be done.

Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) identify the problem as "fear prevents acting on knowledge." They found that organizations that were weak on generating and using knowledge had an atmosphere of fear and distrust. They identify two specific consequences of fear mongering. The first problem is that it causes people to focus on short-term immediate results even if they have to cheat or fudge the books to show that they met targets. The second adverse consequence is that it fosters selfishness and individualism. Look after number one, blame others—survival of the sneakiest.

Fourth, *groupthink* is interesting because it can cut both ways – to prevent action and to encourage ill-considered action. "Groupthink" is a term coined by Janis (1982) that describes "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' striving for unanimity overrides their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (quoted in Wilson, 2007, p. 202). Many examples of negative pressure including our entire list can be attributed to the unexamined assumptions of the in-group going along with the policies and strategies promulgated by a central few.

Groupthink can serve inertia in another way. When teachers tacitly or otherwise fail to face up to poor performance of their peers by reinforcing the norms of the privatization of teaching, they are engaged in an act of groupthink. Groupthink is one of inertia's best friends.

Finally, certain forms of competition unleash negative pressure. When there is an unfair playing field, when certain groups do not have the capacity to be competitive, when some people are left out, competition actually *increases* the gap between high and low performers. Win–lose competition acts like Pfeffer and Sutton's fear mongering. Some individuals win, but at the expense of the system.

What makes the set of the five forms of negative pressure perverse is that they almost always appear together. The mind that thinks up any one of the forms is very likely to find and embrace all forms. One can almost see Douglas McGregor (1960) turn in his grave. Theory X assumptions are alive and well in the land of negative pressure:

- The average human being has an inherent dislike of work and will avoid it if he or she can.
- Because of their dislike for work, most people must be controlled and threatened before they will work hard enough.
- The average human being prefers to be directed, dislikes responsibility, and desires security above everything else. (Theory Y is the opposite where you expect people to rise to the occasion if you treat them well and enable their development.)

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## Positive Pressure

The opposite of negative pressure is not no pressure. No pressure is complacency. No pressure is inertia's other best friend. Fortunately, there are forms of pressure that palpably meet our two criteria: they are motivational, and they are such for hordes of people. They require a degree of sophistication and perseverance to master and to kick in, but they are practically powerful. They don't work overnight, but they are not long-term either – benefits (remember our large-scale criterion) can be obtained in 2 or 3 years, and then leveraged for greater gain thereafter.

We have identified and used five forms of positive pressure:

1. sense of focused urgency
2. partnerships and peers
3. transparency of data
4. nonpunitive accountability
5. irresistible synergy

I define these in turn and then provide a case example of them in action. Recall that Kotter did not like frenetic urgency. But he also knows about inertia. After examining about 100 large-scale change initiatives, he formed the following conclusion:

> Incredibly, we found that in over 70 percent of the situations where substantial changes were clearly needed, either they were not fully launched, or the change efforts failed, or changes were achieved but over budget, late, and with great frustration. We also found that in about 10 percent of the cases, people achieved more than thought would have been possible (p. vii–viii).

Kotter (2008) states,

> The winning strategy combines analytically sound, ambitious but logical goals with methods that help people experience new, often very ambitious goals, as exciting, meaningful, and uplifting – creating a deeply felt determination to move to make it happen, and win, now (p. 47).

This is moral purpose with a focus: a confident but humble sense of real hope that this can be done; ideas for acting on the goals; a wraparound sense that there is no time to waste; and a can-do attitude that this will be achieved by the whole team through engaged partnership.

Second, the partnership is crucial in two respects. One is vertical. Central leaders make it clear that they will provide direction and stay the course, but they also are committed to acting through two-way partnerships. Participation is made more meaningful and powerful through the use of horizontal peer learning strategies – within schools, across schools, and across districts. The idea is to learn about implementation from peers during implementation. Knowledge flows and a sense of identity grows with wider circles of peers. Yes there is lots of peer support, but one of the most powerful forms of pressure comes from engaged peers with a sense of urgency. The power of peers is that there are so many of them.

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181    Third, transparency of data is essential and can and must be made into a pow-
182  erhouse. Transparency is about two things: results and practice (i.e., the practices
183  that caused the results). The good news is that both of these components are now
184  recognized as crucial and are being developed in tandem. This is about assess-
185  ment of learning (especially higher order skills), and the link to precise, high-yield
186  instructional practices that produce such learning for all students.
187    There is still in the education field too much assessment (without adequate links
188  to instructional practice) and too much stick wielding. Cisco, Intel, and Microsoft
189  have just partnered with leading academics to produce new assessments linked
190  to powerful instructional practices for the twenty-first century skills (Partners in
191  Education Transformation, 2009). This initiative promises to develop and make
192  available higher order assessments, and equally importantly to identify the effective
193  instructional practices associated with the accomplishment of these new learning
194  goals.
195    Transparency of data about results and practice is powerful positive pressure
196  when used with the other four pressure elements in this section. It exposes not only
197  results, but practices that produce the results. It generates specific, precise, visually
198  clear images of what works. It is accessible for all as it takes all the excuses off the
199  table.
200    Nonpunitive accountability must accompany transparency. Openness will do its
201  work if people do not run away. The combination of positive pressures actually helps
202  people to experience success, thereby motivating them to do even more. Nonpunitive
203  accountability plays down "judgmentalism" in favor of high expectations in your
204  face. Achievement data, effective practices, decisions about progress or not, are
205  relentlessly pursued and portrayed. These practices act as (effective) accountability
206  but accountability per se is not the main point. The value of relentless nonpuni-
207  tive accountability is that it is a *powerful strategy for improvement* with external
208  accountability as a natural by-product.
209    Finally, positive pressure is never piecemeal. The only chance to alter the course
210  of inertia (because it is embedded culture) is to attack the cultural core itself in
211  order to create a new replacement organic culture with positive pressure and support
212  seamlessly built-in. Thus, coherence, alignment, and synergistic integrated forms of
213  the first four positive pressures working in concert need to be established as "the
214  new way we do things around here."

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## A Case Example

220  The previous section could be written off as mere theory. It is not. There is now a
221  powerful growing presence of many countries, provinces, and states committed to
222  what Michael Barber, Fullan, and MacKay (in press) calls "the professionalization
223  of system reform." There is not total agreement, but a growing commitment on the
224  part of politicians and professionals to put these ideas into practice, and yes, with a
225  sense of urgency.

We can look for many manifestations of this in the coming year(s), and here I report on only one, namely, the case of Ontario where we have been using and studying the role of positive pressure since 2003. Here are some of the main elements expressed in reference to the five components of positive pressure presented in the previous section.

The Ontario public school system consists of 2 million students, 4,000 elementary schools, and 900 secondary schools within 72 districts. From 1995 to 2003, it was a stagnant system in terms of literacy and numeracy achievement – essentially flatlined and had actually lost ground with respect to high school graduation rates.

With a new government in 2003, and a commitment to educational improvement as measured by student learning, the province formulated a strategy based on purposeful, positive pressure. Based on the five elements of pressure outlined in the previous section, the strategy created a powerful base for improvement.

## A Sense of Focused Urgency

Being elected in 2003, the new government immediately announced a small number of ambitious goals: improve literacy, numeracy, and high school graduation. The other elements of positive pressure created the essential means of getting there but let's stay with urgency for a moment. Urgency is not (although it could be) a crisis. In all cases, it is a sense of deep dissatisfaction with the status quo and a corresponding ambitious but manageable focus. The government set targets, roughly committing to going from 54% high proficiency in literacy and numeracy in grades 3–6 to 75%; and from 68% high school graduation to 85%.

These three priorities were stated and reiterated in all educational pronouncements. The priorities gained greater prominence by the establishment of an informed "guiding coalition" (GC), chaired by the premier and included the top officials (minister, deputy minister, advisers). The GC is a kind of "feet to the fire" mechanism that constantly puts pressure on the priorities, strategies, and progress. It was clear to all that literacy, numeracy, and high school graduation represented a small core set of urgent ambitious priorities.

It is interesting to observe that negative or frenetic sense of urgency always loses steam. It has no focus or momentum. Focused urgency maintains and even gains energy. When the government was re-elected in 2007, after four successful years, it was not complacency but greater urgency that characterized the mood. The premier commented just after the election in 2007 that he had changed in two ways since 2003, namely, (a) he was more confident about being on the right track and (b) more impatient. With positive pressure, urgency (partly because of initial success) actually intensifies as you go.

## Partnership and Peers

A second form of powerful pressure consists of strategies that cause peers to interact and learn from each other in implementing improvements. Central leadership

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provides direction, a sense of urgency, a concern with monitoring results and invests in strategies whereby peers can learn from each other. I mention a few here.

One is called "schools on the move" where over 100 schools (currently) have been identified as experiencing 3 years of gains in literacy and numeracy. These schools are profiled by name, demographics, strategies used, and results obtained. Funds are made available to other schools to learn from these schools – not in a hierarchical, superior sense of accomplishment, but rather, "this is hard work let's learn from those who are making progress."

Other similarly based strategies include "networked learning communities," "districts learning from other districts" achieving success in district-wide reform, and schools facing difficult challenges being paired with other schools facing similar challenges but experiencing success.

In all these strategies, peers learn specifically from each other about what is working. Of course, there is plenty of support, but there is also a built-in form of pressure that happens organically. Nothing is more powerful than positively driven peer pressure.

## *Transparency of Data*

Transparency or openness of data, as will be recalled, refers to two elements that must be connected. One is data on student achievement – performance data over time and disaggregated so that it is clear which groups are doing well or not. The other component is transparency of practice. We have to be able to access and learn from others who are employing more effective instructional practices in getting greater achievement results with given groups of students.

We have just seen in the previous strategy (peers learning from each other) how this works to get at effective instructional practice. Here we add the outcome data. It is crucial to note that there is a very close integration between instruction and assessment in these strategies. Schools examine and get better at identifying the *causal* relationships between particular instructional actions and specific student engagement and learning.

In Ontario, we pursue this from two perspectives, what I would call micro- and macro-viewpoints. Micro is the school; macro is the district or state. At the school level, in addition to promoting instructional practices in the classroom that closely link to diagnostic assessment (the daily two-way street between diagnosis and instruction), we foster three school assessment perspectives. First, schools begin to compare themselves with themselves – where were we last year on literacy achievement, the condition this year, and what do we aspire to for the next year. Second, schools are enabled to compare themselves with schools in similar circumstances (what we call "statistical neighbors"). This "apples to apples" comparison is valuable and stimulating especially when used in conjunction with peer learning strategies. Third, we help schools compare their performance to a larger external standard such as 95% success or the provincial target.

The macro use is from the district or province vantage point. Here, we have employed nonpunitive strategies. We have created a "statistical neighbors" database. All 4,000 elementary schools are on the database. They are organized into four bands – those schools facing the most challenging circumstances, two groups in the middle, and a fourth set situated in the least challenging contexts. Other demographic data are included: size of school, rural/urban, percent of ESL students, percent of special education students, and so on. Finally, each schools' student achievement data are included – grade 3 and grade 6 percentages of students achieving proficiency on the state tests in reading, writing, and mathematics – six scores in all for each school, year after year.

The province monitors results, has a turnaround schools strategy (see below), and invests in helping school principals learn how to use statistical neighbors to monitor their own performance, to learn from others, and to work on strategies that will beget better results.

Transparency as can be seen is a pressure point. What makes it a positive pressure is that it is used largely nonpunitively, and the information is readily and easily accessible, not just for learning outcomes, but also as a route to learning about the practices that produced the results.

All of this is reinforced by negotiating annual targets (in the six results areas) based on existing and previous performance. Every school and every district is always cognizant of how well it has been doing or not in comparison with its own previous efforts, and in terms of what its peer schools are accomplishing.

## *Nonpunitive Accountability*

One of the most perplexing problems in large-scale reform is how to turn around large numbers of poor performing or nonperforming (coasting) schools. We have already seen that punitive accountability backfires. Absence of pressure honors inertia. The previous three forms of positive pressure already stimulate action and improvement. A focused sense of urgency gets people's attention; partnership and peer learning increase support, and also pressure from successful cases (it is being done in circumstances similar to ours); transparency of data makes it even more evident who is successful and who is not.

These three forces, however, are not powerful enough to improve the whole system. This is where nonpunitive accountability comes in because it puts the spotlight on all the schools and their performance. We have already seen that transparency of performance data and practice stimulates improvement for many schools. Nonpunitive accountability puts acceptable "teeth" in the change proposition. Here is how it works in practice.

First, in the face of poor or stagnant performance, leaders make it explicitly clear that the schools in question are not to blame. We call this nonjudgmentalism. Poor performance is recognized – transparent data tell us so – but the entire initial response focuses on capacity-building rather than criticism. Put another way, it is best to test the capacity-building hypothesis – if knowledge and skills were

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361 developed would better performance ensue – rather than dwell on whose fault it is –
362 the latter being a classic de-motivator.
363    Again, this is not just theory. We have done it with success through a strategy
364 called the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP). As whole system (all
365 schools) reform unfolds, it is necessary to elevate expectations for all schools in an
366 explicit action-oriented manner. OFIP is a natural next step to focusing energy and
367 capacity-building because it "picks up" schools that are, so to speak, not responding.
368 We have three categories of OFIP schools:

370 1. OFIP1 ($N = 36$): these are schools whose students are achieving below 35%, as
371    measured by the percentage of students achieving the high standard provincial
372    average of 75%;
373 2. OFIP2 ($N = 200$): schools whose students are achieving 35–50%;
374 3. OFIP3 ($N = 755$): schools whose students are scoring 50–74%, but are coast-
375    ing (i.e., their student achievement is between 50 and 74% but is flatlined or
376    declining over a 3-year period).

379    Three points are crucial here. First, the focus is on *all* schools not just the
380 so-called "low performing schools." Over 1,000 (25% of all) elementary schools
381 are involved, including those schools that seem to be doing okay but actually are
382 "cruising" showing no improvement over a given 3-year period.
383    Second, OFIP schools are publicly labeled (any district could identify its nine
384 or ten OFIP schools by name), but do not feel stigmatized. They are not treated as
385 "failing schools,", but rather as schools in need of capacity-building. In some sense,
386 it is all in the attitude – Theory Y not Theory X: treat people nonjudgmentally, invest
387 in their capacity-building, and (in most cases) reap the reward. Third, these schools
388 really do get specific capacity help – the kind of help that is being discovered and
389 delivered from the three previous positive strategies.
390    All of this is increasingly specific. The name of the game is clarity, precision,
391 and relentless implementation of effective practices. The key to success is consis-
392 tent implementation of a few key strategies and time for staff to work together with
393 a specific focus. All staff is engaged in the development of the school improve-
394 ment plan and the monitoring of progress in achieving the goals in their school
395 improvement plans. All OFIP schools are required to have in place:

397 • Uninterrupted blocks of time for literacy and numeracy
398 • A common assessment tool for primary and junior divisions
399 • A school improvement team that uses the school effectiveness framework as a
400   guide to examine data, identify instructional intervention, and to plan for next
401   steps in meeting ambitious targets for student learning
402 • A school improvement plan (SIP) revised based on the school's self assessment
403   and linked to the board improvement plan (BIP)
404 • Resources to implement a comprehensive literacy and numeracy program across
405   the school

- A process to regularly monitor the growth and progress of specific students to ensure equity of outcome
- Interventions for struggling students

We could be much more specific if space permitted but basically OFIP helps lower performing or stagnant schools install practices of schools that are highly effective. And it does this without "attitude." The result is that most OFIP schools improve – in 2007–2008, OFIP schools moved ahead 10 percentage points higher compared to the non-OFIP schools. No OFIP school, as I have said, feels negatively labeled. This is positive pressure at its best.

But, what if schools or certain districts (with high numbers of OFIP schools) do not improve? First, this is a much smaller number compared to systems that have a punitive accountability. Second, the pressure on nonresponsive schools and districts is mounting. The small number of schools and districts not moving forward become more and more noticeable. And yes, eventually direct intervention on the part of governments aimed at school districts, not improving despite all efforts, is necessary. But this (because of the strategy) is in a very small number of situations. When direct intervention is exercised under these (relatively last resort and small number of cases), it is applauded by the public and peer districts (as in "it is about time someone intervened").

The lesson here is first use indirect means of pressure such as the three addressed earlier in this section, add more direct, but still positive measures as in the OFIP strategy, and then take more serious interventionist action in those (few cases) failing to move forward.

## *Irresistible Synergy*

The previous four positive pressure points when pursued in an integrated fashion create relentless synergy. Strategies are focused, aligned, comprehensive, and based on partnership. They foster concentrated practice linked to results. Through purposeful action people become more skilled, as they become more skilled they become clearer (skill produces clarity), and as skill and clarity combine they generate *shared* ownership.

The corresponding positive results themselves are further energizers. Literacy and numeracy increased by 10% (using a very high standard of proficiency) across 4,000 schools in 4 years: high school graduation rates increased from 68 to 76% over the same period; morale of teachers and principals increased; and the percentage of new teachers leaving the profession by their 4th year plummeted from 32 to 9%.

## Conclusion

Ontario is not a conclusive case. It still has not yet met its ambitious targets, let alone full success. It is difficult to maintain the sense of urgency. Perhaps the

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pressure points are not strong enough. But the main line of argument holds. Specific, synergistic positive pressures are powerful in motivating very large numbers of system members to put in the individual and collective effort essential for getting continuous results.

I mentioned earlier the notion of culture as being organic –norms and values built-in that come to have their own momentum. Let's take accountability in terms of it being either a negative or positive culture. Strong accountability measures (our negative pressure points) occur when the system is not improving itself. This, as I have argued, produces even more negativism. By contrast, positive pressure results in a new culture in which the system is committed to and engaged in improving. I like Hargreaves and Shirley's (2009) statement that accountability is the gap that exists where responsibility stops. In other words, if (intrinsically motivated) responsibility is full bore, accountability is redundant. It is a natural and self-evident by-product of intrinsically driven individual and collective responsibility. You still need external accountability, but in synergistic positive pressure cultures internal and external accountability merge.

These advanced forms of integrated positive pressure for whole systems are fairly recent phenomenon – barely 5 years old. But they augur well for the future because they get results. This makes it politically attractive. It is still tough for politicians because the methods are indirect. They prefer "do this, get that" short-term strategies. But the strategies are still politically attractive because they do get results in relatively short time frames – 2 to 3 years, not 5–10.

Globally, attention is now beginning to shift to whole system reform because some countries are noticeably doing better through the explicit use of the strategies identified in this chapter. Barber and Mourshed's (2007) *How the world's best performing systems come out on top* is a case in point. People are now beginning to benchmark not just outcomes, but also policies and strategies.

My prediction is that this whole system reform work, undergirded by positive pressure components, will take off in the next 2–3 years. We will come to know a lot more about the nature, value, and indispensability of positive pressure in large-scale reform. It's about time, and desperately needed in the world of educational reform.

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# Chapter 7

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