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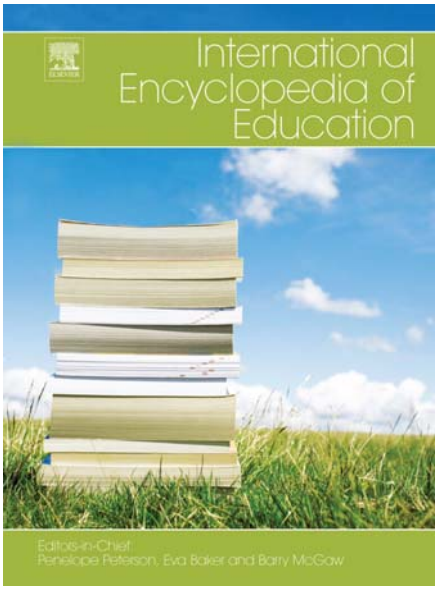

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The Role of the District in Tri Level Reform

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The most distinctive feature of educational reform, over the past decade, has been the increasing focus on system-wide effectiveness. This has been called the tri-level reform: what has to happen at the school and community level, the mid- or district level, and at the state. This new work is not so much about the intralevel developments, but rather about strong multi-way interrelationship across the levels – in other words, systemic reform.

This article focuses particularly on the role of the district – linking both downward (to its schools) and upward to the state. In North America, districts play a more direct line authority role than they do, for example, in England.

The role of local authority in England is more complex with the evolution of the cross-cutting forces of the local autonomy, and more central accountability. The increase in the scope of responsibilities to include all of children's services has further complicated the scene. It is, in this author's view, very difficult at this time to sort out the causal role of local authorities in England. It is too much of a moving and complex target. One empirical study of the role of local authorities in England (the data on which it is based is now 3-years old, which itself is a problem) concluded "the Education Authority attended by pupils has almost no relevance to their progress" (Tymms *et al.*, 208: 261).

The role of the district in North America is more influential. It is true that the impact of the classroom is most important, the school second most, and the district third most, and so on. Nonetheless, this article claims that the infrastructure does matter a great deal.

The main two sections of this article present the case and the data, drawn from this author's own research and the research in the field as a whole. These issues are pursued, first, by considering the role of the district (and its schools), and, second, by placing districts in the context of the state or system as a whole.

The Role of the District

If one takes a quantitative approach, the majority of districts are not effective. To be fair, stimulating, coordinating, and sustaining coherent development across many schools is exceedingly difficult because it requires balancing top-down and bottom-up forces. This article traces the evolution of the role of districts in school reform using informal language to capture the three themes: getting somewhere; not so fast; and what's next?

Getting Somewhere

Since nearly 1990, there has been a growing body of work that points to common characteristics and strategies that successful districts use to raise student achievement. Rosenholtz's (1989) study of 78 elementary schools classified schools as "stuck," "moving," and "in-between." Rosenholtz also found that a disproportionate number of stuck schools came from certain districts; likewise, moving schools were clustered in certain other districts. This prompted her to write a chapter on stuck and moving districts. Rosenholtz comments:

> The contrast between stuck and moving districts, nowhere more apparent than here, underscores how principals become helpful instructional advisors or maladroit managers of their schools. It is also clear that stuck superintendents attribute poor performance to principals themselves, rather than accepting any responsibility to help them learn and improve. This again may indicate their lack of technical knowledge and subsequent threats to their self-esteem. If districts take no responsibility for the in service needs of principals, of course, principals become less able colleagues, less effective problem-solvers, more reluctant to refer school problems to the central office for outside assistance, more threatened by their lack of technical knowledge, and, most essential, of substantially less help to teachers. (p. 189)

Anderson (2006), a colleague of mine, reviewed the research on district effectiveness and named 12 key strategic components.

1. District-wide sense of efficacy.
2. District-wide focus on student achievement and the quality of instruction.
3. Adoption and commitment to district-wide performance standards.
4. Development and adoption of district-wide curricula and approaches to instruction.
5. Alignment of curriculum, teaching, and learning materials, and assessment to relevant standards.
6. Multi-measure accountability systems and system-wide use of data to inform practice, hold school and district leaders accountable for results, and monitor progress.
7. Targets and phased focuses of improvement.
8. Investment in instructional leadership development at the school and district levels.

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9. District-wide, job-embedded professional development focuses and supports for teachers.
10. District-wide and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community (including in several cases positive partnerships with unions).
11. New approaches to board–district relations and in-district relations.
12. Strategic relations with state reform policies and resources.

One would think, then, that there is a growing consensus and that it is just a matter of going to town on what we know. One would be wrong.

Not So Fast

So a district should get the standards right, align curriculum to them, conduct assessments on the new alignment, provide solid and continuous professional development on curriculum and instruction, set up a data system that can be used for both assessment for and assessment of learning, and engage with the local community and state reform policies. It may surprise many readers that these steps, by themselves, are not sufficient and, at best, may represent a waste of resources, and, at worst, do more harm than good.

The experience of the San Diego City Schools District is a good place to start with respect to the not-so-fast theme. Coming off a highly successful experience in District 2 in New York City from 1988 to 1996, Tony Alvarado was hired as Chancellor of Instruction in 1997 to join a new high-profile superintendent – Alan Bersin – in San Diego. In a sense, the question was – if you could take the best knowledge, and add resources and political clout, could you get results in a large urban district within a 4-year period, and then keep going, in this case, moving from success in 45 schools (District 2) to 175 schools (San Diego)? The answer, incidentally, is yes, but it requires good strategies and a good deal of finesse.

The San Diego reform story is probably the most closely watched reform initiative in the history of urban school improvement. Here, this article draws on the excellent account by Hubbard *et al.* (2006). The San Diego strategy was well detailed and explicit from day 1. It consisted of the following three main components:

- Improved student learning: closing the achievement gap.
- Improved instruction: teacher learning through professional development.
- Restructuring the organization to support student learning and instruction.

The focus was on literacy, and the strategies were highly specific. Teachers received support from literacy coaches and principals who were positioned to be leaders of instruction, with day-to-day support, and monthly full-day in-service sessions by area superintendents whose new roles (and new people) were re-created as instructional leaders.

This article does not provide the space to enter a detailed account of the San Diego experience, but the main outcomes and reasons can be identified (for a full account, see Hubbard *et al.*, 2006). To cut to the chase, literacy achievement increased, somewhat, at the elementary level in the 1997–2001 period, had a limited impact in middle schools, and was a dismal failure in high schools. Momentum was lost by 2001, Alvarado was asked to leave in 2002, and Bersin – after slowing down the nature and pace of reform in 2003–04 – was replaced by the school board when his term expired in June 2005. What happened?

One could say that it was a political problem – the board was divided from the beginning (3:2 in favor of the reform initiative), and the teacher union that opposed the reform from the beginning eventually carried the day. There is some truth to this, but the deeper explanation is closer to the theme of our interest in meaning and motivation relative to pace, the too-tight/too-loose problem, and the depth of instructional change and thinking required to make a difference. Hubbard *et al.* (2006) expressed the basic problem in terms of three challenges that the strategy failed to address: "The need to accomplish deep learning within the constraints of a limited time frame; principals' and coaches' limited understanding of the concepts they were trying to teach; and the difficulty of reaching common ground between school leaders and teachers" (p. 128).

All this, despite plenty of classroom visits, walk-throughs involving all schools, frequent problem-solving sessions, and an emphasis on job-embedded professional learning. The San Diego case is an exercise in the dilemmas faced by leaders with an urgent sense of moral purpose and considerable knowledge of what should happen in classroom instruction. However, it also points to how the strategies employed must be much more respectful of how deep change happens. Much good was done in improving literacy achievement in elementary schools, but it was not deep enough or owned enough to go further. The San Diego strategy failed because the pace of change was too fast, the strategy was too unidirectional from the top, relationships were not built with teachers and principals, and, above all, the strategies did not really build capacity – which is the development of the collective knowledge and understandings required for ongoing instructional improvement that meets the needs of each child.

San Diego is also one of the better examples of attempted reform. Most districts do not focus their efforts on district-wide reform. In addition, when they do, they encounter limits to what can be accomplished despite considerable effort and resources.

Another confirmation of our not-so-fast worry comes from the Cross City Campaign for Urban School

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Reform (2005), which has been cross-referenced above and examines major reform initiatives in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle. All three school systems had the attention of political leaders at all levels of the system and focused on many of the right things, such as literacy and math; all of the systems used current choice strategies such as concentration on assessment-for-learning data, invested heavily in professional development, developed new leadership, and focused on system-wide change.

In addition, they had money – Seattle had $35 million in external funds, Milwaukee had extra resources and flexibility, and Chicago had multimillions. There was huge pressure, but success was not expected overnight. Decision-makers and the public would have been content to see growing success over a 5- or even 10-year period. The upfront conclusion of the case-study evaluation was that for many of the principals and teachers interviewed, "the districts were unable to change and improve practice on a large scale" (Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2005: 4).

The issues in the Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle reforms help to identify the missing ingredient, even though those districts appear to have gotten most components right. Chicago, for example, appeared to have an impressive strategy: Academic standards and instructional frameworks, assessment and accountability systems, and professional development for standards-based instruction are among the tools of systemic reform that are used to change classroom instruction (Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2005: 23).

This appears to be a standards-based, system-wide reform that sounds like it should work. The failure, in this author's opinion, is that the strategy lacks a focus on what needs to change in instructional practice. In Chicago, teachers did focus on standards, but in interviews, they "did not articulate any deep changes in teaching practice that may have been under way" (p. 23). Furthermore, "instructional goals were articulated more often in terms of student outcomes or achievement levels than in terms of instructional quality, that is, *what the schools do* to help students achieve" (p. 29, emphasis in original). Milwaukee reveals similar problems in achieving instructional improvements while using greater decentralization in the context of system support and competitive choice. The focus was on literacy; a literacy coach was housed in every school in the district and considerable professional development and technical support services were available. Education plans for each school were to focus on literacy standards through (1) data analysis and assessment and (2) subject-area achievement targets – including literacy across the curriculum. Sounds like a convincing strategy. However, what is missing, again, is the black box of instructional practice in the classroom. The case writers observe: "We placed the Education Plan in the indirect category due to its non-specificity regarding regular or desired instructional content and practices" (Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2005: 49).

More generally, the report concludes that while these serious district-wide reform initiatives appeared to prioritize instruction, they did so indirectly (through standards, assessment, and leadership responsibilities). However, in the experience of principals and teachers, the net effect was that "policies and signals were non-specific regarding intended effects on classroom teaching and learning" (p. 65).

The third case, Seattle, is a variation on the same theme. The game plan looks good. Standards defined the direction, while the district's Transformational Academic Achievement Planning Process "was designed as a vehicle for helping schools develop their own strategy for (1) helping all students meet standards, and (2) eliminating the achievement gap between white students and students of color" (p. 66). Similar to Milwaukee, the district reorganized to support site-based management, including the allocation of considerable resources to schools. The case writers observe:

> The recent effort to become a standards-based district was one of the first sustained instructional efforts with direct attention to teaching and learning. However, the conversations district leaders had about standards *were rarely connected to changes in instruction.*

(Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2005: 69; emphasis added)

The report continues: "At the school level, finding teachers who understood the implications of standards for their teaching was difficult" (p. 72).

This article cites one more case, which – in some ways – is more encouraging but still proves this author's main conclusion that instructional change is going to require different strategies that help develop and shape collective capacity and shared commitment to engage in continuous improvement. Supovitz (2006) conducted an excellent case study of the reform effort in Duval County, Florida. The title of his book captures the emphasis of his analysis – *The Case for District-Based Reform.* Supovitz chronicled the district-wide reform effort from 1999 through 2005. Duval County has 142 schools. The reform strategy is now familiar to us.

1. Develop a specific vision of what high-quality instruction should look like.
2. Build both the commitment and capacity of employees across the system to enact and support the instructional vision.
3. Construct mechanisms to provide data at all levels of the system that will be used both to provide people with information that informs their practices and to monitor the implementation of the instructional vision.
4. Develop the means to help people continually deepen their implementation and to help the district continually refine this vision and understand its implications.

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With a sustained 5-year focus on the four strategic components, the district made significant gains in student achievement. For example, the number of schools receiving C or better on the state assessment system went from 87 (of 142) in 1999 to 121 by 2003. In addition – for the first time in a 7-year period, in 2005 – no school in the district received an F on the state accountability system.

The strategy was driven by a strong superintendent who helped to orchestrate the development of district-wide capacity according to the four core components described above. The strategy was enacted with considerable action and focus. As Supovitz reports, "Duval County leaders repeatedly stated their vision and the strategies for achieving it in public venues" (p. 43). Supovitz argues that the spread and deepening of district-wide success is as much "gardening" as it is "engineering" (p. 63). And that the balance requires "advocacy without mandate" (p. 66), "fostering urgency" (p. 68), and "building existing proof" of success (p. 69). One sees a similar array of strategies as in San Diego, but with less heavy-handedness: direct training of teachers, school standards coaches, district standards coaches, principal leadership development, and district leadership development.

With 6 years of consistent effort and with an explicit emphasis on professional learning communities as a strategy, Supovitz comments: "The possibilities of professional learning communities—rigorous inquiry into the problems and challenges of instructional practice and the support of that practice—seemed only to be occurring in pockets of the district" (p. 174). Much was accomplished in Duval County, but it was, by no means, deep or durable after 6 years. So the not-so-fast observation presented above is an apt worry. Even with comprehensive strategies and relentless focus over a 5- or 6-year period, one is still not getting it right.

What's Next?

It has been seen that even the most ambitious efforts fall short, and these initiatives involve only a small minority of districts. Most are not nearly so active. This author believes that these efforts are on the right track, but the approach needs considerable refinement. To state what is needed upfront, there is need for a focus on instruction, standards, assessment, continuous feedback and use of data, and instructional leadership at the district and school levels. However, also needed is a process of interactive capacity building and commitment building within and among schools, and between schools and the district. Above all, this, increasingly, must de-privatize teaching so that learning in context can occur, and the district must stay the course over a period of 10 or more years. This work does not necessarily require the same superintendent over two or more terms, but does require continuity of good direction over two or three superintendencies. This article cites three examples, from three different countries, of what this means in practice.

York Region District School Board just outside Toronto, Ontario, is a multicultural district with a growing and diverse population, and over 100 different languages spoken in the schools. There are 145 elementary schools and 30 secondary schools. We have been working in partnership with York for the past 5 years, including monitoring the processes and results as we go (see, e.g., Sharratt and Fullan, 2006). The focus is on literacy in an initiative called the Literacy Collaborative (LC). The basic approach is designed to shape and reshape district-wide continuous improvement – what this author calls "capacity building with a focus on results." Key features of the approach include:

- A clearly articulated vision and commitment to literacy for all students, which is continually the subject of communication in the district.
- A system-wide comprehensive plan and framework for continuous improvement.
- Using data to inform instruction and determine resources.
- Building administrator and teacher capacity to teach literacy for all students.
- Establishing professional learning communities at all levels of the system and beyond the district.

All schools – including all secondary schools – joined the LC in a phased-in fashion, with school-based teams being the focal point for capacity building. At the elementary level, teams consisted of the principal (always the principal), the lead literacy teacher (a leadership role within the school, with a teacher released for 0.5 to 10 time to work with principals and teachers), and the special education-resource teacher. High school teams were slightly larger and focused on literacy – especially in the ninth and tenth grades. The LC model has evolved to contain 13 parameters, which are not listed here but include embedded literacy teachers, timetabled literacy blocks, a case-management approach focusing on each student, cross-curricular literacy connections, and so on (see Sharratt and Fullan, 2006). There is constant interaction, action research, and capacity building through formal monthly sessions, and many learning-in-context interactions carried out daily by school and district leaders within and across schools.

The results – as measured by province-wide assessments – were significant after a 3-year period (2001–04), but not as substantial as district leaders had hoped. On a closer examination of the initial cohort of 17 schools, it was found that nine of the schools had implemented the 13 parameters more deeply compared with the other eight. When the latter schools were separated, the results showed that the nine schools – despite starting below the York Region and Ontario provincial average in 2001 – had risen above both averages by 2004. In the meantime, the district

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was working with all 167 schools. Province-wide results, in 2005, showed that York Region increased by a full 5%, on the average, in literacy across its 140 elementary schools. High schools also did well for the first time on the tenth-grade literacy test.

In terms of what is new, the theory of action reflected in the approach in York Region can be considered. First, we have many of the elements we have seen previously – standards, assessment of and for learning, instructional leadership, and so on – but one also sees two new significant emphases. One is that the leaders have taken a long-term perspective; they realize that it takes a while for change to kick in; they frequently speak of staying the course, and persistence but flexibility; the pace is steady, even pushy, but not overwhelming; they expect results, not overnight, but also not open ended. The other new aspect is that leaders are careful not to judge slow or limited progress in given schools. They take what this author calls a "capacity building first, judgment second" stance. Large-scale change is all about moving the whole system so that more and more leaders permeate the system and take daily actions that build capacity and ownership.

This is an entire district that is on the move. There has been one director (superintendent) – Bill Hogarth – throughout the 8-year process, and a strong rapport between the board and the district leadership. As a strong collaborative culture has been built, the chances of continuing this direction when he leaves are greatly increased. As this author said, one does not need the same superintendent over 8–12 years, but one does need continuity and deepening of good direction.

In further work in the York Region, the Superintendent of Curriculum – Lyn Sharratt – and this author examined the prospects for "sustaining leadership in York Region" (Fullan and Sharratt, 2007). When school principals were asked how they sustain their focus on continuous improvement, five major themes were identified. For effective building for the future, school principals said that they simultaneously focus on five interrelated components:

1. Shared beliefs, goals and vision
2. Distributed leadership and professional learning cultures
3. Data-based decisions/impact measures/celebrating success
4. Mobilization of resources (time, ideas, expertise, money)
5. School/community/home relations. (Fullan and Sharratt, 2007: 126)

While it is observed that sustainability will always be problematic, it can be concluded that York Region has done better than most in establishing the conditions that make sustainability more likely. In particular, four propositions have been formulated:

- Proposition One: Sustainability is not about prolonging specific innovations, but rather it concerns establishing the conditions for continuous improvement.
- Proposition Two: Sustainability is not possible unless school leaders and district leaders are working together on the same agenda.
- Proposition Three: Proposition Two notwithstanding, sustainability is not furthered by school and district leaders simply agreeing on the direction of the reform. Any temporary agreements must be continually tested and extended in the crucible of implementation with school and district leaders being equally influential.
- Proposition Four: Despite the clear signs in York Region and despite being able to identify favorable conditions, we still do not know what will happen when district leadership changes. (Fullan and Sharratt. 2007: 134–135).

A second good example is the decade-long reform initiative of the 58 000 student Boston Public Schools (BPS) under the leadership of Superintendent Tom Payzant. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) describe the basic plan as based on six essentials: effective instruction as the core essential, student work and data, professional development, shared leadership, resources, and families and community. Again the words are familiar, but it is the theory of action – and careful cultivation over a decade – that is the real story. Professional development, for example, takes place at the school level and features a coaching strategy involving collaborative teaching groups. In collaborative coaching, teachers learn by analyzing one another's work under the guidance of skilled coaches. The idea is not just to observe one another's teaching and share ideas, but to critique lessons in a way that links to improving student learning. As with the York Region, a well supported and easy-to-access database on student learning is used to help teachers examine their teaching in light of ongoing results, integrating data into professional learning. Substantial outreach to parents and community is a major component of teachers' and schools' work.

Education Week published a profile on BPS and Payzant on the occasion of his announcing his retirement, in 2007, following 11 years as superintendent ('Time on his side,' Allen, 2006). In addition to reporting on the activities and approach just described, *Education Week* gets beneath the strategy.

Mr. Payzant did not bring the Boston schools to this point overnight. He rolled out initiatives not all at once, but only when they made sense. The idea was to start small, test things out, and retool them. In addition, he focused on building consensus. All were radical notions in an era of hard-charging, quick turnaround leaders (p. 31).

The impact of the Boston strategy brought significant results in student achievement. In the tenth-grade English language arts and in mathematics, scores have increased steadily since 1999 for all four race and ethnic groups (black, white, Asian, and Hispanic), with some leveling off in the 2004 and 2005 years. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) summarize the positive impact in these words.

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> Multiple evaluations show that Boston's approach to instruction [and] to collaborative coaching and learning are benefiting students and teachers. Student outcomes have improved, as have relationships between teachers and students and among teachers. Boston sees other positive system-level consequences of their strategy—enhanced coherence, increased accountability at all levels, and increased buy in from district educators. (pp. 126–127)

Again, one sees a more sophisticated theory of action carrying the day. It is not that one is seeing flawless strategies. The pace of change was, likely, not fast enough in Boston. Put another way, few superintendents would be allowed to take this amount of time in 2009. However, the point remains. Too fast is a more likely negative scenario. Balancing pace – press for improvement with corresponding capacity building – carefully assessed as you go, is required. Payzant's own reflective lessons are revealing. He says he left some areas of work "too much to chance." He said he should have allowed fewer programs for teaching literacy. Likewise, he said it was a mistake to let high schools come up with their own plans for creating more personalized learning environments for students ('Time on his side,' Allen, 2006).

The performance in Boston, along with substantial improvements, also reveals a plateauing effect in the last 2 years – a phenomenon that is normal, not to be lamented, but requiring new, deeper strategies. Elmore (2004) and this author (Fullan, 2006) have both commented on the plateau effect as a natural and (depending on what one does next) valuable opportunity to consolidate and then go deeper. In addition, while all four race and ethnic groups have gained, the gap has not closed and, in some cases, has increased. The next critical question for Boston is: who will be Payzant's successor? This author has said that, in these cases of being on the right track, it is crucial for districts to hire for continuity and deepening of good direction.

We move to England for our third example – Knowsley Local Education Authority. Note here, the contrast to the negative findings from Tymms *et al.* (2008), which found that the local authority made little difference in the education lives of students; qualitative case studies are likely to find examples of success (and failure) as opposed to large quantitative studies.

In any case, Knowsley Local Education Authority (called Local Authority, since 2005) is a metropolitan district just east of Liverpool. It is defined as the sixth most-deprived authority in the country. In 1999, Knowsley consisted of 59 primary schools, 11 secondary schools, and seven special schools. The district was audited in that year as part of the national inspection scheme conducted by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). The assessment found serious weaknesses on most basic dimensions of performance: student achievement, capacity to improve, relationships between the district and the schools, and linkage to the community. A new Director of Education, Steve Munby, was appointed in 1999. A second inspection was conducted in 2003, which found major improvements. What happened in 4 years to transform a very low-performing, disadvantaged, discouraged system into one vastly improved and ready to do more?

One can begin with OFSTED's 2003 findings (OFSTED, 2003).

Recent developments and the implementation of well-thought-through initiatives have resulted in Knowsley establishing itself as a local education authority (LEA) of some significance. It has improved over the past 3 years and has shown how vision and leadership, together with excellent relationships with schools, can revive an education service (p. 2).

As OFSTED further noted, both literacy and numeracy scores increased at a time when national averages were flatlined. OFSTED also observes that "the new administration has taken partnerships and collaborative working to an unusually high level." In addition, "headteachers of individual schools see themselves as part of a wider team with responsibility for the education service throughout the borough" (p. 2).

Munby (2003) states that the drivers for change are low student performance, new leadership, external funding, and a moral commitment to narrow the gap between the highest and lowest performing schools. Munby then lists what he calls his "priorities for sustainability":

- Establishing an innovative, coherent, and comprehensive policy framework that provides direction for instruction and professional learning
- The training of "lead learners" to support school learning
- Deploying lead learners to work with clusters of schools to embed new practice
- Cluster-based work—action learning, observing and sharing learning, supporting small-scale action research to provide evidence of impact on pupil motivation, and engagement with the learning process
- Encouragement and support of the further development and embedding of a culture of co-planning, co-teaching, co-review, and co-coaching in schools, everyone a leader of learning. (p. 2)

In January 2005, Munby was appointed the chief executive officer (CEO) of the National College of School Leadership. A time for the continuity of good direction. The new director, Damian Allen, was appointed from within Knowsley, having been deputy director. Because Munby had employed a strategy of co-development of leadership, Allen was already immersed in the strategy, and, in fact, had helped shape it. By the time he was appointed in January 2005, the new Every Child Matters agenda had become a reality, with all children's services – including schools – coming

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Table 1 A comparison of Knowsley's strategy with the government's white paper

Co-leadership between LA and schools	Vs.	Individual independent specialisms
Collaboration and federation as standard	Vs.	Collaboration and federation as a response to weakness
System performance	Vs.	Individual school performance
Failure driven out by challenge and support	Vs.	Failure driven out by early intervention and closure
Development of co-leadership	Vs.	Schools need autonomy
High support and engagement with schools	Vs.	Light-touch monitoring

under the LA. Allen became the first executive director, Children's Services. Knowsley has continued with the directional strategy of having an ambitious agenda for children, but forging ahead with co-leadership and capacity building. The district proceeded to introduce a remarkable secondary school reform that involved closing all 11 high schools, and reopening them with eight brand-new schools – complete with new state of the art buildings called learning centers. Knowsley did this without any rancor and, indeed, considerable enthusiasm – partly because of the co-leadership strategy, partly because new national money was available for new buildings, and partly because it was already experiencing success (e.g., the percentage of 15-year-olds passing five or more GCSEs – a mark of advanced placement courses for further education – had doubled from 22% in 1998 to 45% in 2005, while the national average moved from 47% to 57%).

Ever conscious of the theory of action that had gotten them there, Allen (2006) made a presentation at a national meeting in which he compared the Knowsley strategy with the strategy embedded in the recent white paper from the government (Department for Education and Skills, 2005). After pointing out the inconsistencies in the white paper, he noted the following comparisons (Knowsley on left; white paper on right, **Table 1**).

What is new, in this author's view, is the creating of partnerships of engagement that mobilize the entire district. It is still early in Knowsley's journey, but one can see a consistent, adaptable strategy in which successive leaders build on good direction, interacting with internal and external contexts.

The District and the State

It is beyond the terms of reference in this article to take up the complex and new emergence in the role of the state/central governments whether they be federal and state/provincial, or single national entities. There is, certainly, a growing focus on system strategies such as Michael Barber's *Instruction to Deliver* in England, and Hargreaves and Shirley's (forthcoming) *The Fourth Way*. Issues of market model, education and citizen empowerment, accountability, the new teacher professionalism are all intermingled in this debate.

For our purposes in this particular context, one can take the narrower question of the implications of the previous section on the role of the state. The first thing to say is that the district should be focused and proactive in its own right, irrespective of the state's role.

Second, and more directly, this author's conclusion is that there is a direct analogy between the relationship of the schools and their districts, and the relationship between districts and state. In other words, in the same way that schools and the district must work as a single system, so too must the state and its schools/districts.

We have had a direct experience in shaping such a system in Ontario, Canada, since 2003. Ontario has two million students, 4900 schools, and 72 districts. We have focused, with considerable success, on improving literacy, numeracy, and high school graduation. The principles are similar to those that were reviewed in the last section (but obviously more complex, given the increase in size and component parts).

The relevant policies, strategies, and results, so far, are well documented in Levin *et al.* (2008) and Fullan (2008). Thus, Levin *et al.* describe the main sustaining elements as:

- Respect for staff and professional knowledge
- Comprehensiveness (whole system)
- Coherence and alignment through partnership with district and schools.

This author has described the actual action strategy as based on six elements:

1. Direction and sector engagement
2. Capacity-building with a focus on results
3. Supportive infrastructure and leadership
4. Managing the distractors
5. Continuous evaluation and inquiry
6. Two-way communication. (Fullan, 2008: 278)

It is encouraging to find that the same lessons about smaller system effectiveness (districts) apply with respect to whole-system reform. It can safely be predicted that the next phase of reform – assume 2009–14 – will focus deeply on system-wide reform on what this author has called tri-level reform. It is not just that the goal is to achieve new effectiveness across the whole larger system, but rather that the strategies involve system components at all three levels working in two-way and multi-way partnerships. One is, indeed, heading toward greater comprehensiveness, greater focus, more capacity building, and greater precision in zeroing in on core goals of literacy, numeracy, and high

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school graduation. The next phase should accelerate our learning and knowledge with regard to school and system effectiveness.

Indeed, we and others are experiencing considerable success in increasing student achievement in literacy and numeracy and high school graduation rates across whole state systems (Fullan, 2010a, b).

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Relevant Website

http://www.michaelfullan.ca – Michael Fullan.