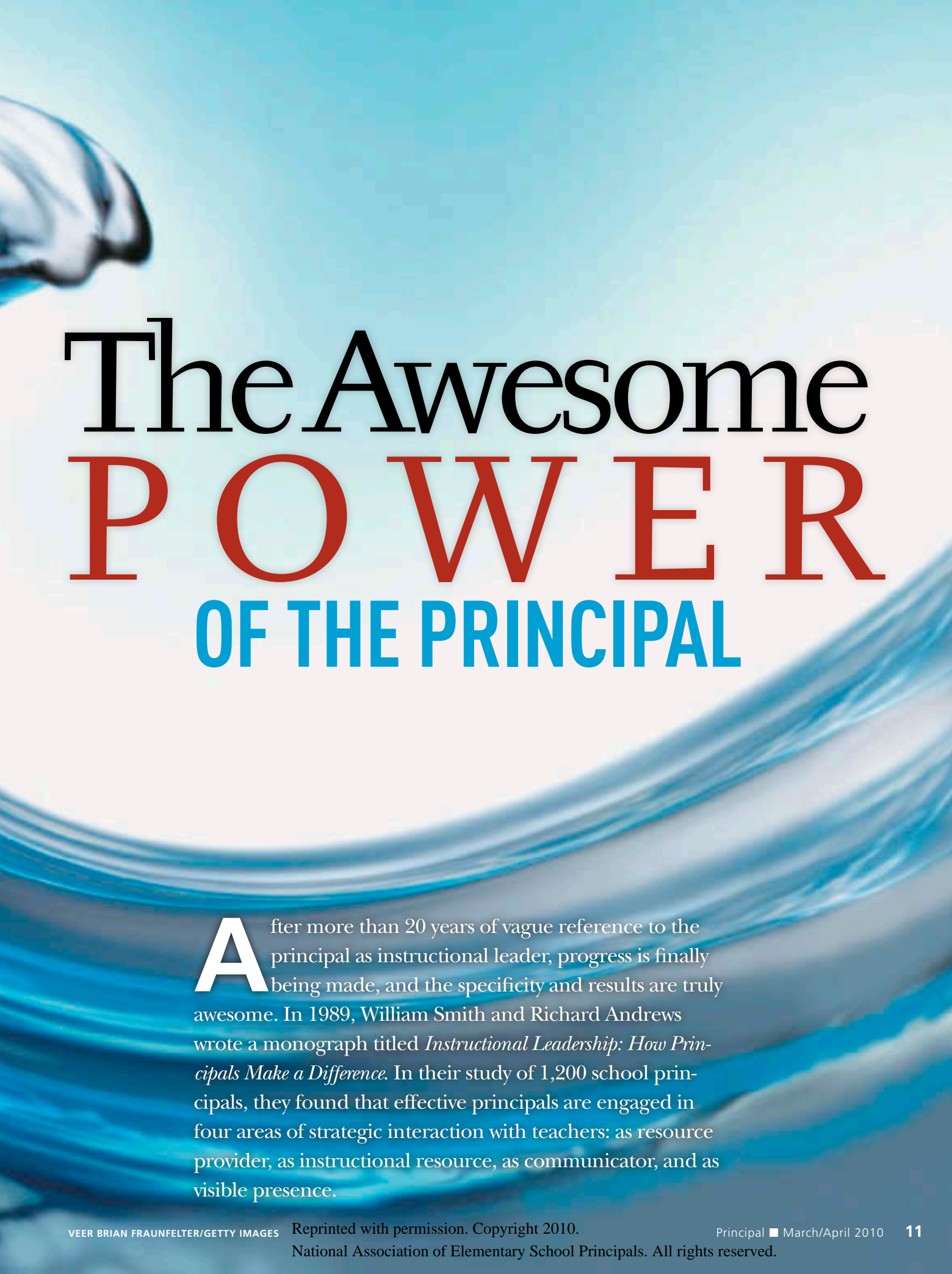


The key to the speed of quality change  
is embedded in the power of the  
principal helping to lead organization  
and system transformation.

**Michael Fullan**

The background of the page is a dynamic, high-speed photograph of water splashing, creating a sense of movement and energy. The water is a vibrant blue, and the splash is captured in a way that suggests it is falling from the top left corner. The overall effect is clean, fresh, and powerful.

# The Awesome POWER OF THE PRINCIPAL

**A**fter more than 20 years of vague reference to the principal as instructional leader, progress is finally being made, and the specificity and results are truly awesome. In 1989, William Smith and Richard Andrews wrote a monograph titled *Instructional Leadership: How Principals Make a Difference*. In their study of 1,200 school principals, they found that effective principals are engaged in four areas of strategic interaction with teachers: as resource provider, as instructional resource, as communicator, and as visible presence.

As valid as these findings still are, they had no sticking power because they failed to lead to practical action on any scale. But now we know specifically what being an instructional leader looks like. My colleagues and I in Ontario, Canada, and elsewhere have been working with various systems, bringing about impressive reforms on an ever larger scale and with ever greater precision and practicality. The two case examples below demonstrate clearly what this new work looks like and reveal six features that stand out as essential to principals in their efforts toward school reform.

### Two Schools, Two Approaches

I use only two examples but could have selected hundreds out of the 4,000 elementary schools with which I am working in Ontario. (Since 2003, I have worked with the premier and minister of education to transform the entire public system in Ontario.)

Crosby Heights is a K-8 school of 662 students in a low-income neighborhood in a growing York Region community just north of Toronto. As a new principal in 2004, Ryan Friedman faced demoralized unionized staff, unsafe and shabby facilities, critical parents wanting to get their children out, and low achievement on provincial tests in reading, writing, and math.

Three years later, the school's third-grade reading, writing, and math proficiency scores had jumped from 44 percent, 40 percent, and 50 percent, respectively, to an astounding 90 percent, 87 percent, and 83 percent, respectively. Ryan had instilled in the staff a strong moral imperative (learning for all, whatever it takes, all equals all, excellence in all that we do), but—and this is crucial—he also enabled staff to enact their moral purpose when many doubted that success was possible. He did the latter with what I am increasingly calling “the skinny of change”—a small number of key things done with relentless consistency, namely:

- Establishing job-embedded learning;
- Building relationships with teacher support staff and parents;

### “Powerful principals are obsessed with the instructional core of personalizing learning and getting results for each and every student.”

- Modeling hope and optimism, life-long learning, and caring;
- Providing needed resources;
- Seizing opportunities to consistently communicate and stay the course;
- Investing in and participating in capacity-building in relation to literacy and numeracy; and
- Celebrating and building on success.

Also in York Region is Armadale Public School, the region's largest elementary school with more than 900 students, more than 80 percent of

whom are immigrants. When principal Jill Marr arrived at the school in 2008, she faced a demoralized staff, terrible physical facilities, alienated students and parents, and one of the lowest performing schools among the district's 150 elementary schools. Twelve months later, Jill and the staff had reduced the number of at-risk kids from 378 to 233, mostly concentrated in kindergarten to grade 3. Their achievement scores on the six provincial tests (reading, writing, and math in grades 3 and 6) for 2008-2009 climbed by 20 to 25 percentage points in all six areas. Attendance at school council sessions that involve meetings with parents and the community has grown by more than 200 percent.

Jill and her staff did this through a similarly focused set of strategies that was seen at Crosby Heights:

- Improved physical building facilities;
- Reorganizing and increasing access to



instructional resources;

- Capacity-building in which teachers and students clearly articulate their learning targets, success criteria, and instructional actions;
- Job-embedded professional learning in which teachers model lessons in one another's classrooms;
- Teachers enabled to build class and student profiles and participate in case management sessions to identify and implement high-yield strategies; and
- Greater two-way interaction with district consultants and resources.

The day that Jill informed the leadership team of the achievement results for 2008-2009, the team of 12 teachers went wild with celebration. I asked the group how they could possibly get such results in such a brief period in a very large school. One teacher said they did a small number of key things with relentless consistency within and across classrooms. Seen here is the speed of quality change—amazing results accomplished by well-led teachers.

Ryan and Jill illustrate two types of instructionally focused principals at the elementary school level, each of which is highly effective. Jill is an instructional expert (the best instructor in the building); Ryan is not. With her expertise, Jill must make sure she doesn't dominate; however, with her knowledge and expertise she can move faster in organizing and getting resources, demonstrating and coaching, and developing other instructional leaders. Ryan is strong on focus, building relationships, shaping the process, and developing individual and shared responsibility. Both principals are deeply and actively immersed in the daily improvement of the school. As Lyn Sharratt and I described in *Realization: The Change Imperative for Deepening District-wide Reform*, both principals are engaged in vibrant learning networks of schools within the district, and in the overall change of improving the culture of the district and its 190 schools.

### The Essence of a Principal's Power

It has been observed that the principal is second only to the teacher in his

## “Successful principals develop others in a way that is integrated into the work of the school.”

or her impact on the student. There is a way in which this underestimates the true impact of the principal. For example, there is clearly a multiplier effect if the principal helps, directly and indirectly, 30 or more teachers become dramatically more effective in their teaching. Here are six steps to take to move theory to practice in organizational change.

**Ready-fire-aim change savvy.** Awesome principals have a fierce bias for action, but they are impressively careful in tending to relationships. They display what I have called in *Motion Leadership: The Skinny on Becoming Change Savvy* a “ready-fire-aim change savvy” in which nine interrelated action behaviors and skills have been identified such as build relationships as you go; beware of fat plans (as Doug Reeves has put it, the size and the prettiness of the planning document is inversely related to the quality of action); and communication during implementation is paramount.

**Participate as a learner.** In the recent best-evidence synthesis of research on the impact of the principal on student outcomes, Viviane Robinson and her colleagues in *School Leadership and Student Outcomes* found one factor that was twice as powerful as any other factor with respect to the principal's role in effecting student outcomes. It was “the degree to which the principal participates as a learner” in helping teachers figure out how to make progress. Ryan and Jill are lead learners. They don't dominate; they are fully engaged.

**Instructional focus.** Powerful principals are obsessed with the instructional core of personalizing learning and getting results for each and every student. They make instruction a priority. They deal effectively with distracters. They create a culture of job-embedded learning. They

help the school focus on a small number of core priorities they resolutely pursue while avoiding innovation overload.

**Develop others.** Successful principals develop others in a way that is integrated into the work of the school. These collaborative cultures have two powerful features: They are collectively effective at solving problems and making progress on an ongoing basis, and they generate a pipeline of leaders for the next phase. Succession is less of a problem in these school systems because they are constantly cultivating kindred spirits and future leaders who can go even further.


**Network and system engaged.** Awesome principals are not only intra-school leaders; they actively participate in district networks of peers and have a strong sense of two-way partnership with the district. Through peer and vertical bonds with the district, they also develop extremely powerful mutual allegiances that strengthen the district culture and beyond.

It is interesting to see how highly effective principals relate to research. They don't implement research. Rather, they are proactive practitioners who critically consume research as they go. For example, Jill and Ryan know the research on change and instructional improvement, but they know this by pursuing a path of learning for all, and then seeing how research can help them. The sequence is crucial here.

The key concerns are not how do we put research into practice or how can we go from theory to practice. Practitioners don't think that way. Instead, they set out to solve particular problems and, in a natural way, they see how research might help them. They know an insightful idea when they see one because they are steeped in trying to solve specific problems. They and their staffs are clearly in the driver's seat. How do we put research into practice puts the question the wrong way around. Rather, the key question is: How can research (which is really other practitioners' effective practice) help solve the problems that I am facing? Effective principals are always learning inside and outside their buildings.

**Realizing moral purpose.** A curious thing is happening on the way to moral purpose. Nearly all schools, districts, and states embrace the mission that all kids can learn. But some teachers in some situations deep down do not believe or have doubts as to whether “these particular students” can learn. In this respect there is a powerful breakthrough in the new work of the principal. They do not try to convince ambivalent or reluctant teachers through moral exhortation and research evidence. Instead, they prove that these hitherto unsuccessful kids can learn by helping teachers actually do it. This is where the awesome power of principals lies. It is after it is accomplished that teachers’ moral purpose shines and becomes a huge energizing resource for subsequent phases. And for the first time this is now happening on a very large scale.

How to get policymakers to realize the underlying power of the new theo-

ry of action associated with this work is still a perplexing problem. The answer is not in producing more individuals with quality characteristics, but rather it is to develop the collective capacities of whole schools and whole school systems to become effective in their day-to-day work. We have implemented successful examples of school and system reform on a large scale that are documented in my publications *Motion Leadership* and *All Systems Go*. From practice to theory, from doubt to conviction, the key to the speed of quality change is embedded in the power of the principal helping to lead organization and system transformation. 

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## WEB RESOURCES

*School Leadership and Student Outcomes* explains that when school leaders promote and/or participate in effective teacher professional learning it has twice the impact on student outcomes across a school than any other leadership activity. [www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515/60169/60170](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515/60169/60170)

Read additional articles by Michael Fullan about school leadership and school improvement at [www.michaelfullan.ca](http://www.michaelfullan.ca).



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