

Education for Continuous Improvement

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The development of learning communities is essential for both short-term school improvement, and for longer-term continuous improvement. In *The Meaning of Educational Change* (Fullan, 2007), I said that improvement occurs when teachers gain new 'meaning' in relation to effective innovations. This meaning is in terms of a) curriculum material, b) behaviors and skills, and c) beliefs and understanding.

The problem is that most government strategies are not conducive to 'meaning making' as I have defined it. In this brief article I talk about the roles of three levels of the system — school and community, district, and the state — in bringing about effective system change, and then take up the issue of continuous or sustainable improvement.

School and Community

Classroom improvement is at the heart of change. In another publication, Peter Hill, Carmel Crévola and I presented the 'Breakthrough' model as a powerful example of reform (Fullan, Hill & Crévola, 2006). We place *moral purpose* at the center of the model. Moral purpose is the commitment to serve every student and to 'raise the bar and close the gap' of student learning and achievement for all groups of children in society. At the classroom level we identified the 'triple p' model — personalization (the unique learning needs of each student), precision (responding to these needs with the most appropriate instruction), and professional learning (each and every teacher learning every day).

The problem is that teachers left on their own will not be able to enact the triple p reality. The first order of explanation as to whether individual classroom teachers will learn on a continuous basis is whether the school in which they teach is collaborative. Thus, professional learning communities in which teachers learn from each other led by a principal who facilitates such learning and its focus on instructional improvement is critical.

Research has told us quite a lot about the characteristics of professional learning communities. These are schools that focus on instruction, use data on student learning as a strategy for improvement (assessment for learning), foster teachers' learning from each other through joint planning, cross-classroom visitations, and have school leadership that helps create and sustain the conditions to do all this.

In terms of school leadership the principal is key, but so are teacher leaders. In my recent book, *What's Worth Fighting for in the Principalship?* (Fullan, 2008), I recommend a set of strategies for principals to help lead learning communities. They must promote and facilitate teachers' learning from each other; they must model instructional leadership by organizing teachers to learn new methods and participate in some of these decisions; they must set up a system where data on student learning is made available and used to improve instruction (assessment for learning) and to meet external accountability requirements; and they must develop teacher leadership (such as mentors, literacy coaches).

As teachers become better and more focused as a learning community they involve parents and the local community. We have found that when teachers remain isolated from each other they are more cautious about reaching out to parents. When they are working collectively, teachers have more confidence and begin to realize that parents and the community are essential for success.

The District

Just as teachers within a school will not collaborate without facilitation, so will schools within a region. Countries differ as to the type of district infrastructure they have, but whatever it is it must embody certain qualities. In our work we are not just focusing on school culture, but also *district culture*. This means two things. First, district leaders need to establish two-way relationships with schools in order to develop the characteristics of effective schools — the focus, the use of data, the learning from each other I discussed in the previous section. Second, in order to do this effectively, districts need to facilitate *cross-school* learning. We call this 'lateral capacity'. Thus, clusters of schools, school networks and the like become power peer-related learning communities. As long as they are focused and as long as they are well led.

Districts that are effective work with all the schools in the district. There are a number of characteristics common to effective districts, namely: focusing, use of data for improvement, leadership that concentrates on instruction, resources devoted to capacity building, reducing unnecessary "distractors" (e.g. too many initiatives, excessive bureaucracy), links to the community, two-way communication, and a sense of identity between schools and the district as a whole.

In sum, school culture and district culture go hand in hand, and build in the conditions for instructional focus connected to student learning and achievement.

The State

Over the past ten years we have been working with state policymakers to develop strategies that are more effective for improving the whole system. In essence this influence is blending top-down and bottom-up change forces. From the top, two things are needed. First, generating collaborative and collective leadership with a common focus on learning *and* on the policies and strategies necessary for sustainable development. One pertains to having enough leaders and emergent leaders that recruitment, on the job learning, and success to new leaders are strongly linked. Stated another way, one key to the future involves the continuity of goal direction. Thus, it is not turnover of leadership that is the problem, but rather *discontinuity* of good direction.

The second condition is that there is a commitment to and mechanisms for evidence-based inquiry and action so that learning about new, more effective practice is built into the system.

In closing, I would like to briefly describe what we are doing in Ontario to create the conditions for continuous improvement. The vision for this, already being put into place since 2003, is contained in the paper *Energizing Ontario Education* (2008). It involves focus: a priority for literacy and numeracy backed up by additional strategies for capacity building, early childhood development, teacher education, and leadership development.

We can refer to how Ontario addresses these priorities. First, they set a few core priorities (especially around the basics of literacy and numeracy; second there is a focus on capacity building (training and support to develop instructional competencies); third, they establish a close linkage between instruction and data on student learning and achievement (assessment for, and assessment of learning); fourth, they invest in leadership development, especially for school principals; fifth, they pursue policies related to attracting the best people into the teaching profession and providing the conditions for them to develop on the job; and finally, there is an explicit system for intervening with students and schools that have poor performance for whatever reasons — such intervention focuses on capacity building linked to instruction and achievement. In short, the role of the state is to provide direction and resources, but to be flexible as it interacts in partnerships with local communities.

Conditions for Continuous Improvement

Fortunately, some of the most important things to do in the short run also serve to establish conditions for sustainable improvement. The key to improvement is performance of schools in order to improve the whole system. There are 4,000 elementary schools in Ontario in a system that serves two million students. All 4,000 schools, along with the 72 districts, are engaged in improvement in literacy and numeracy with the provincial agency the National Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) that operates within the Ministry of Education.

First, we have established the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) within the Ministry of Education whose role is to work with the 72 districts, and schools to develop capacity within schools and districts and school to develop capacity within schools and districts to implement effective practices in literacy and numeracy.

Second, a data-base has been created that contains the annual achievement scores in reading, writing and math for all grade 3 (8 year-olds) and grade 6 (11-12 year-olds) students.

Third, we identify schools and districts that are achieving better results in order to learn about their strategies and practices, and to disseminate these practices to other schools.

Fourth, we have created an intervention program (called Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP)) in which the LNS works with schools that are achieving poor results or are stagnant. There are some 1,100 of the 4,000 schools in this program. The idea is to provide additional capacity building support to these schools. In the past year these schools improved 10% more than all other schools in the province.

Fifth, the province has invested in leadership strategies for literacy and numeracy mentors and coaches, and for school principals so that they could play lead roles in improving classrooms and schools.

Finally, there is a commitment to 'stay the course' in establishing the conditions that will make schools and districts engage in the inquiry and evaluation essential to stimulate continuous improvement.

In conclusion, sustainability is pursued through focus, capacity building, collaboration and use of ideas and strategies associated with continuous improvement. And above all these activities are aimed at the reform of the whole system.

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