**The Hope for Leadership in the Future**

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Leadership is to this decade what standards-based reform was to the 1990s. Put another way, if you want to boost achievement scores from poor to good levels, a strong standard-based reform strategy can take you so far; but if the aim is to accomplish deeper, continuous improvement, leadership at many levels of the system is required.

The common problems schools face in advanced countries include:

- The need to raise the bar and close the gap between high performing and low performing students and schools in literacy and numeracy.

- The need to focus on the socio-emotional development of children in the early years.

- The difficulty of engaging pupils in learning, especially in the secondary school years.

- The problem of maintaining a teaching and learning focus in the face of overload, multiple initiatives, and diversions that sap the energies of educators.

- The failure of the overall system to capture the hearts, minds and vitality of teachers and leaders in the service of continuous improvement.

- The gap between many parents/communities and schools in aligning their efforts to improve learning.

- The extreme difficulty of changing school cultures toward collaborative professional learning communities, again especially at the secondary level.

The first level response to these problems in many jurisdictions (rightly so in my view) has been to tackle the foundation goals of improving literacy and numeracy. In so doing, England, for example, has boosted its proficiency scores of 11 year-olds from the mid-fifties in percentages to the mid-seventies over a five year time frame (1997-2002) in both literacy and numeracy.

During this period the focus on leadership has not been on the development of basic leadership (school heads, for example), but on literacy leaders themselves (literacy coordinators and consultants at the schools, local education authorities, regional and national levels), or at best on school heads as instructional leaders for literacy and numeracy) This has been useful to a point, but will not carry the day.

About the turn of the century, systems around the developed world seem to come to the collective conclusion almost overnight that the development of school leadership itself had been neglected. Indeed it had. The 1990s was virtually a lost decade in terms of leadership development. Within the space of a year or two, England established the National College of School Leadership, the Wallace Foundation and several other U.S. based philanthropic entities made leadership development their top priority pouring millions of dollars into the cause, and

virtually every state department in advanced countries passed new policies for assessing, developing and certifying educational leaders.

These are steps in the right direction, but there are two fundamental limitations in the strategies currently employed. First, they are too confined to achievement and performance scores of pupils; second, they suffer from what I will call the individualistic fallacy.

As to the first limitation, consider Jim Collins research (<u>Good to Great</u>) in comparing "good" companies (strong performance here and there) and "great" companies (sustained economic performance over a minimum of fifteen years). He found that good companies had what he called 'Effective Leaders' (who catalyze commitment to vision and standards), but great companies had 'Executive Leaders' (who build enduring greatness). This is a crucial distinction as applied to educational systems. Especially in an era of centrally driven high stakes accountability, it is possible (actually likely) to produce school leaders who become preoccupied with the bottom-line of pupil achievement scores. They may even demonstrate progress during their term as school head. At best this will represent short-term, nonsustainable reform. Instead, the success of school leaders should be measured not in terms of their impact on student achievement scorers during their tenure, but rather on how many leaders they have developed and left behind who can go even further than they did. Student achievement should be part of the picture, but establishing conditions for continuous improvement is equally important.

The second limitation – the individualistic fallacy – is more subtle. Initial strategies to address the leadership problem have focused on establishing new

qualifications, providing incentives and opportunities to meet new standards, and increasing salaries and related benefits for school heads. Some jurisdictions have created new learning opportunities concerning mentoring, networks and the like. The assumption, apparently is that we can change schools by providing new leadership, but if you look closely the assumption is that one changes the system by changing individuals. This is only part of the solution – less than half I would say – because one also has to address system change directly. By system change I mean changing the conditions under which school leaders work – the resources available, the opportunity to interact with other leaders across schools, and above all the potential to make a difference in difficult circumstances. Otherwise, good leaders will not come in large numbers nor will the best ones stay.

This is also the conclusion of the recent policy brief compiled by the Wallace Foundation, which is entitled <u>Beyond the Pipeline</u>. The pipeline of quality candidates is important but pales in comparison to changing school cultures. In <u>The Moral Imperaative of School Leadership</u> I argue that we need to combine a heightened emphasis on the moral purpose of school systems (and leaders therein) with the organizational resources, conditions and norms necessary for continuous improvement. Such cultures, as found in Bryk and Schneider's study of schools in Chicago, build organizational qualities that "enable risk and greater effort," "enhance problem-solving," "coordinate clear, collective action," and "sustain ethical and moral imperative."

Finally, and this is the key conclusion, the processes of change required in order to move to the next level of reform will be incredibly demanding. What is needed are leaders and cultures that will generate the extraordinary effort

needed, making it both doable and worthwhile. Deeper change cannot rely on a few good leaders – it requires large numbers of leaders who find the challenge exciting but not beyond their reach.

# **References**

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