New Lessons for Districtwide Reform

Effective leadership for change at the district level has 10 crucial components.

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Especially during tough times, how can school districts implement systemic reforms that will last? We have been focusing recently on how districts have brought about effective change in their schools. Our current work involves several districts, including, for example, three in Canada (the Edmonton Catholic Schools in Alberta and the York Region School Board and the Toronto District School Board in Ontario); two in the United States (Chicago Public Schools and Guilford County Schools in Greensboro, North Carolina); and one in England (the Bristol Local Education Authority).

Key lessons are emerging from our increasingly sophisticated understanding of how districts implement large-scale change. We have identified 10 components that make improvement possible. When leaders implement these components rigorously, they can build school capacity and improve student learning.

In Toronto, for example, achievement in literacy increased by 9 percentage points in four years. In Edmonton, student results on provincewide assessments have risen 11.5 percent in four years. In Chicago, students are making gains on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills as schools develop strong leaders and professional learning communities. On an even larger scale, an initiative involving all 19,000 primary schools in England increased the percentage of 11-year-olds who achieved a proficient level in literacy and mathematics from 63 percent in 1997 to 75 percent in 2001.

We have found that the success of large-scale systemic improvement depends on working to realize all 10 components. Let us examine these crucial components; because they are so interdependent, we assign them no order of priority.

<u>A Compelling Conceptualization</u>

The terms of reform—*professional learning community, capacity building, assessment for learning*—travel easily, but the underlying conceptualization does not. Think of the vision as an iceberg, the vast majority of which is underwater. Many leaders take shortcuts by slicing off the visible part of the iceberg and then assuming that they have captured its full power.

Aside from an understanding of the education field's new insights into pedagogy and change, effective district leaders also know how to use the key advantages that their position affords them for implementing their vision: They have the mandate from the board that appointed them, the big picture of the organization because of their position in it, a public forum and visibility, and control over the financial and human resources necessary for bringing about change.

To implement their vision, district leaders must build a coalition of leaders who pursue the vision in practice. Like distributed leadership at the school level, large-scale reform requires pluralized leadership, with teams of people creating and driving a clear, coherent strategy. The district will also require external support, but change will not be possible without this daily, internally driven leadership. Having a driving conceptualization means high engagement with others in the district and plenty of two-way communication that deepens shared ownership and commitment.

Collective Moral Purpose

The moral purpose of educators may seem universal, but it has too often emerged as an individual phenomenon—the heroic teacher, principal, or superintendent who succeeds for brief periods against all odds. This moral martyrdom is great for the individual's soul, but it does not lead to sustainable reform. We need, instead, to think of the moral imperative as an organizational or systemic quality (see Fullan, 2003b).

Collective moral purpose makes explicit the goal of raising the bar and closing the gap for all individuals and schools. That moral imperative applies to adults as well as to students. We cannot advance the cause of students without attending to the cause of teachers and administrators. Many passionate, morally driven superintendents have failed because they blindly, even courageously, committed themselves to students, running roughshod over any adults who got in the way.

The moral imperative means that everyone has a responsibility for changing the larger education context for the better. District leaders must foster a culture in which school principals are concerned about the success of every school in the district, not just their own. Districts must be concerned about other districts and the overall environment in which they are working.

Competition among schools within districts or even across districts leads to counterproductive behaviors—what Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) call "internal competition [that] turns friends into enemies" (p. 180)—and it undermines interdependence, trust, and loyalty. Fostering identity that extends beyond one's school to other schools in the system makes districtwide improvement more likely.

The Right Bus

In his discussion of appropriate roles in organizations, Collins (2001) talks about getting the right people into the right seats on the bus. Equally important, we argue, is making sure that the organization has the right bus in the first place—that is, the right structure for getting the job done.

Take Chicago, for example, which has worked intensively on restructuring its approximately 600 public schools for the past 15 years. In the past two years, Chicago has created 24 clusters of schools, with 12 to 43 schools in each cluster. Heading each cluster is an area instructional officer who focuses relentlessly on teaching and learning; a management support director handles the cluster's managerial tasks. Each cluster contains its own key instructional staff, the members of which serve as coaches for reading, math and science, specialized services, technology, and, in some clusters, for English language learners.

Within each school, the principal and teacher leaders head teams that drive the school's coordinated professional learning and goals. All leaders at the cluster and school levels are engaged in multiple forms of ongoing capacity building—that is, helping staff develop professionally and work together toward a common goal.

These structures reflect underlying principles of an effective education organization: a common direction and collective purpose, a laserlike focus on teaching and learning for both adults and students, and an alignment of structure and roles. The tasks of setting up and maintaining an effective structure involve much more than the typical organization chart reflects. Such an organization requires intense human resource work and the ability to adjust to meet new challenges.

Capacity Building

The main mark of successful leaders is not their impact on student learning at the end of their tenure, but rather the number of good leaders they leave behind who can go even further. These two aspects, of course, are not mutually exclusive; leaders need to focus on both achievement and the development of future leaders. Their own professional development must continue throughout their careers, especially in learning how different roles in complex, uncertain environments work in tandem. This learning needs to occur in context—not only through workshops but also through daily interactions in cultures designed for job-embedded learning and coordination. Capacity building is essential for everyone: school-level, area-level, and system-level employees, including the most senior executives.

In Chicago, people learn in weekly meetings, study groups, focused institutes, extended academies, and walkthrough site visits, during which teams visit schools to learn from and react to leadership and pedagogical strategies. STARS (School Teams Achieving Results for Students), an innovative program launched with 135 schools in Chicago in 2002 and with 115 schools in Guilford County in 2003, focuses on building the capacity of school leadership teams to improve both pedagogy and results. This comprehensive, multiyear initiative includes school teacher-principal teams and district-level leaders in weeklong institutes and multiple-day follow-ups each year, thereby fostering deep professional learning communities across the

districts. Cycles of application and regular examination of student results enhance the transfer of skills to classrooms and schools.

Lateral Capacity Building

Building lateral capacity means connecting schools within a district—and even more broadly—to develop new ideas, skills, and practices that increase the ability of individuals and organizations to bring about improvements. In England, for example, the Bristol Local Education Authority's 19 secondary schools include 10 that are above and 9 that are below the national norm on various measures of performance. During the past year, the district leadership and the 19 principals have paired schools and departments to raise the bar and close the achievement gap. For example, a group of math teachers who have been successful in motivating otherwise disengaged students works with teachers in another math department who are dealing with similar problems without much success. This new way of learning is a feature of the district's evolving culture.

Other districts in England are working with one another to improve student learning, with leaders often networking across districts. In York Region district, school teams from 140 schools meet seven days each year to learn from one another ways to improve literacy achievement (Rolheiser, Fullan, & Edge, 2003).

When done well, these efforts have considerable benefits. Individual school principals become almost as concerned about the success of other schools in the district as they are about their own. Teams working together develop clear, operational understandings of their goals and strategies, fostering new ideas, skills, and a shared commitment to districtwide development.

Ongoing Learning

The districts with which we work develop and articulate a compelling vision, but they recognize that the vision will continue to evolve during implementation in response to political pressures, policy shifts, financial conditions, and school and classroom conditions. Effective districts do not just get the strategy right to begin with; they continually refine it using systematically collected information. Districts maintain close contact with problems, promote and invite regular feedback, and engage in problem-solving actions. This disciplined inquiry fuels deeper and more-sustainable improvement.

Knowing whether students and adults are growing and learning is an important part of this disciplined inquiry. We must ask key questions about assessing student learning: How should we gather student performance data? How should we evaluate

disaggregated data? How can we link data to instructional improvements? We also need to know whether teachers, administrators, and other staff members are growing professionally; whether learning communities within and across schools are evolving; whether district staff and the system are pursuing ways to better serve the needs of schools and the area; and whether students and parents are satisfied.

<div align="center">Productive Conflict</div>

All changes worth their salt reveal differences. Because districtwide reform is complex and involves many levels and people, it produces even more questions and disagreements. Successful districts must engage in a difficult balancing act. If they give in too soon in the face of conflict and fail to stay the course, they will not be able to work through the inevitable barriers to implementation. But if they show an inflexible commitment to a vision—even though it is based on passionate moral purpose—they can drive resistance underground and miss valuable lessons.

As district leaders get better at implementing reform, they learn how to distinguish good conflict from bad, and the built-in checks and balances in the system help sort out productive conflict from the dysfunctional kind. Successful organizations explicitly value differences and do not panic when things go wrong. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) found that these organizations learn from mistakes while remaining disciplined about what they are learning.

Successful districts are collaborative, but they are not always congenial and consensual. Working in a high-trust yet demanding culture, participants view disagreement as a normal part of change and are able to value and work through differences.

Some commitments, of course, are nonnegotiable, such as raising the bar and closing the achievement gap, promoting ongoing development of professional capacity, and ensuring transparency of results. The nonnegotiables reduce the areas of conflict and channel differences into areas that are essential for solving problems.

<div align="center">A Demanding Culture</div>

Organizations with a high level of trust among participants combine respect, personal regard, integrity, and competence—yes, competence. We cannot trust even well-intentioned people if they are not good at what they do. Effective, highly interactive cultures incorporate high pressure and high support; it is impossible not to notice whether someone is doing great work or bad work. Because people in these cultures know that improvement is tough going, they are more inclined and prepared to confront incompetence.

As Bryk and Schneider (2002) found in studying high-trust school cultures in Chicago, these cultures are more—not less—likely to take action against persistently uncaring or incompetent teachers. They take action not only because an uncaring teacher is bad for the students but also because failure to act can poison the whole atmosphere. Students, parents, and colleagues know when bad teaching is being tolerated.

Low-trust cultures do not have the capacity to engage in the great effort and difficult work of improvement. High-trust cultures make the extraordinary possible, energizing people and giving them the wherewithal to succeed under enormously demanding conditions—and the confidence that staying the course will pay off.

Bryk and Schneider are talking about high-trust *schools*; we are talking about raising the bar to create high-trust *districts* in which many schools are motivated and supported to engage in demanding work, able to withstand frustrations along the way, and persistent in their efforts to make reform doable and worthwhile.

External Partners

All improving districts that we know about have active external partners—such as business groups, foundations, community-based organizations, or universities—that help build the district's professional capacity. Unfortunately, we also know of districts that have strong external partners and additional resources and are going nowhere. If leaders don't have the other nine crucial components for district reform in operation, external partners simply exacerbate overload and fragmentation.

Well-placed pressure from external partners, combined with internal energy, can be the stimulus for tackling something that might not otherwise be addressed, and district leaders can use these partners to stir the pot in purposeful directions. External partners can also provide valuable expertise. Chicago, for example, used the resources of the business community through the McKenzie Group to lead the planning effort for its Human Capital Initiative. Working pro bono, McKenzie produced a series of recommendations that led to improvements in teacher recruitment and retention and in principal development. Chicago also received support from the Chicago Community Trust to engage in a reading demonstration project with six metropolitan universities. This project is producing recommendations outlining ways in which different models improve reading instruction in schools.

Effective external support can even come from other school districts. In England, for example, 1,000 elementary school principals who have had success in improving literacy are pairing with 4,000 other principals who are interested in learning more about how to do this.

<u>Focused Financial Investments</u>

We have learned that governments, the public, foundations, and businesses are willing to put more money into public education—not just because of the need, but rather because they perceive that the investment pays off. Last year's success makes possible next year's new money.

Districts need to take two steps to increase financial investment in education. First, they must ruthlessly redeploy existing resources in the service of teaching and learning. Many districts will have to redirect resources from prior programs to new priorities. In Chicago, during the past two years, the district has reallocated internal resources to double the investment in the Chicago Reading Initiative.

Districts also need to figure out how to give responsive governments the confidence to risk new investments, ones that will eventually pay off politically, morally, and through improved performance.

The work of private and public money is different; foundations should amplify, not substitute for, government spending. When the public purse increases its financial investments in education, additional private money enables schools to go even further.

What Else Do Districts Need?

Our knowledge of districtwide, large-scale improvement is still in its relatively early stages, but it is becoming increasingly deeper and more sophisticated. Four issues remain.

- We have found that initial gains in student achievement, which can be significant, tend to reach a plateau. The right strategies appear to increase student achievement, but only to a point. We need stronger approaches, such as supporting collaborative cultures with more resources, investing in leadership, and improving teaching conditions. As the trajectory of success as measured by student achievement stalls, however, policymakers may conclude falsely that schools are failing to improve when in reality they simply need more time and more-robust strategies.

- High schools need more attention. Districtwide success has so far been largely confined to elementary schools and to some middle schools. Educators are now addressing high school reform more systematically; we should see valuable developments during the next few years, such as the Bristol initiative and the Gates Foundation's commitment to building professional learning communities at the high school level. We advocate tackling high school reform with a districtwide orientation.

- We also need to focus on state-level policy and strategies for reform; school, district, and state levels must all work together to make reforms sustainable (Fullan, 2003a). State-level reform is complex, but more jurisdictions are realizing that without a more coherent state-level infrastructure, a district's success will be short-lived.

- Finally, for districtwide reform to evolve, leaders must continually grapple with reconciling the dilemma of centralization versus decentralization. We must not emphasize one side over the other. Ouchi (2003), for example, argues forcefully that we need "to uproot the top-down way of doing things and replace it with huge, revolutionary change." He recommends that every principal be an entrepreneur and that every school control its own budget (pp. 13–14). Although we accept aspects of his imperatives, we stress three additional factors:

  1. Districts must develop *school capacity* to enable schools to act more autonomously.

  2. Districts must foster cross-school learning (lateral capacity) that has powerful benefits for individual schools and for the system as a whole.

  3. Because local autonomy does not guarantee that persistently underperforming schools will improve, districts have a moral obligation to intervene in these schools on behalf of students, families, and the school community.

We are encouraged by the growing number of districts that are focusing on the 10 crucial components of effective leadership and change. As more districts reach out to learn from one another, we can expect greater progress in raising the bar and closing the student achievement gap.

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