Introduction to Challenge of Change: Purposeful Action at Work

By Michael Fullan

The first edition of *The Challenge of Change* was published in 1997. It turned out that this was precisely the year when the field of educational change began a major shift toward deeper action and large-scale reform.

The occasion was Tony Blair's first term election in England in May, 1997. He came into power with a clear and explicit education platform in which literacy and numeracy were named as the core priorities. Blair and his government committed in advance to targets of 80% proficiency in literacy and 75% in numeracy for 11-year-olds — starting at a base of 62%. This was an enormous undertaking because it involved the entire system of 20,000 schools and a timeline of essentially four years.

What was more significant was that Blair and his team, led by chief architect of strategy, Michael Barber, said that they would base their strategy on existing 'change knowledge'. By that they meant that they would combine 'pressure and support' — the pressure of targets, monitoring progress, feeding back data and intervening in cases of low performance; support meant investing in 'capacity building' through establishing new positions at the school, district, and government levels to lead literacy and numeracy; through intensive professional learning opportunities focusing on instructional improvement; and through the development and spread of new high quality curriculum materials.

The good news was that the strategy worked — to a point. Proficiency scores increased from 62% to 75% in literacy and 73% number by 2002 (in fact by 2000). For the first time we were able to prove to politicians that significant results could be obtained on a large scale 'within one election period' — still not reaching the high aspiration targets, but impressive indeed.

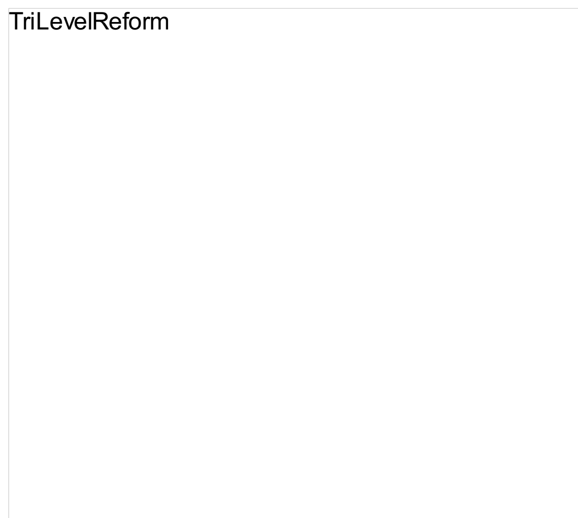
The bad news was that the results plateaued from 2000 onward. In our evaluation of the initiative we attributed this to two things. One was that the strategy was too driven from the top, and as such did not get deep enough into the hearts and minds of teachers and principals. The second and related reason was that the government failed to adjust the strategy, and in fact did not keep the priority at a high enough level as it entered a second term in 2001.

My point is that the effort in England was a kind of coming out of change knowledge from the domain of research to the domain of action. Much of this knowledge incidentally has been chronicled and captured in the fourth edition of *The NewMeaning of Educational Change* (Fullan, 2007).

Tri-Level Reform

We have come to call this approach to system change, tri-level reform (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1:



In order to bring about sustained reform in any school we need to move beyond treating one school at a time to addressing all schools simultaneously. To do so means that the district must have its act together (a system of schools, if you like), and that the state (or in case of federal systems, state and federal) must also approach change from a tri-level perspective.

Many of the articles in this collection (which I will turn to shortly) get at the details of tri-level reform, but at this point I will provide an overview. Tri-level reform does not mean that you wait for the other two levels to get their act together. Whatever level you are operating from it requires two things: focus on your own internal development (a school, a district, or whatever) while at the same time seeking connections with other levels. My own view, not always obtainable, is to establish a system of not only greater alignment across the three levels, but even more importantly, greater *permeable connectivity*, that is, more two-way interaction, communication and mutual influence.

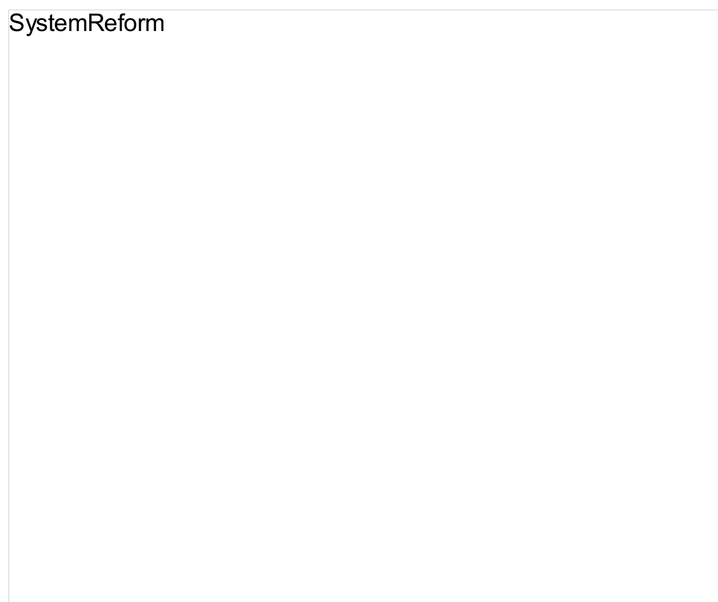
This is not just theory. We have, in fact, been putting this set of ideas into place in Ontario since 2003 when the liberal government came into power (Fullan, 2008a). I have had the privilege of serving as the Premier's education advisor as we have and still are establishing a systematic set of policies and strategies to transform the system in Ontario — a large scale proposition involving 2

million students, 4,000 elementary school, 900 secondary schools across 72 school districts.

We have focused on three core priorities (we recommend that large systems focus on a small number of ambitious goals as core, do these well, and stay the course). Our goals focus on high proficiency in literacy and numeracy (i.e., including higher order thinking, and problem-solving) and high school graduation. In terms of numbers these rates of achieving in Ontario were stagnant for the five years prior to the new set of strategies in 2003. Literacy and numeracy rates hovered around 54% proficiency (remember we are using high cut-off points here) and 69% high school graduation. As of 2008, literacy and numeracy have improved to 65% and high school graduation to 75% — still not full success but strong and continuing progress.

Details of the Ontario strategy are contained in the Levin, Fullan chapter in this book, but I can provide here the basic assumptions and components of the strategy (*Figure 2*).

Figure 2:



The six components in Figure 2 work together. Directional and sector engagement involves direction from the top combined with partnership with the field (schools and districts). It is explicitly presented as neither top-down nor bottom-up, but rather as a *blended* strategy. It involves an inspirational overall vision, a small number of ambitious goals publicly stated (in this case literacy, numeracy, and high school graduation), a guiding coalition (a leadership team at the top who works together), investment of resources, and a sense of flexibility with the field (schools and districts).

Second, instead of leading with accountability, capacity building is at the heart of the strategy. This component consists of strategies and actions that mobilize capacity defined as new knowledge, skills and competencies. For example, a focus on effective instructional practices in literacy and numeracy combined with the development and support of coaches, mentors, and new instructional leadership roles for principals, enables the system to identify and implement new capacities linked to results, namely, greater student achievement. There is continuous attention paid to data on students results: are we making progress; is the progress affecting all subgroups; when do we need to intervene at specific schools and districts to improve capacity in order to get better results, and so on.

Third, and related, all of this work requires a strong infrastructure to support and propel into it. This occurs at all three levels — school leaders, district staff and state or province department staff.

Fourth, and equally important, is a commitment and action to manage the distractors'. In complex political systems, distractors are ubiquitous and inevitable. We make a conscious effort to focus on the small number of goals, to stay the course, to minimize ad hoc initiatives, and to make time available for instructional development.

Fifth, because there are things to learn during implementation, we engage in continuous evaluation and inquiry — what are effective practices, what can we learn from specific examples of school and district success, and how can we spread the word across the system.

Finally, there is continuous two-way communication between the government and the schools/districts. This serves simultaneously to communicate the vision, to detect and respond to problems, and to mark and celebrate success.

Moral Purpose and Instructional Reform

As part and parcel of the new developments since 1997, in addressing the whole system there has also been a move to go deeper into moral purpose and instructional improvements. Moral purpose consists of the abiding commitment to raise the bar and close the gap for *all* students, regardless of background. Moral purpose by itself is just rhetoric so this is why the actual strategies of change are so crucial. To put it one way, these strategies must be in the service of fulfilling moral purpose. This goal has been enabled by new developments in pedagogical practice. In literacy, numeracy and other realms of teaching and learning there has been an overall impressive development in identifying high yield instructional practices.

Education, compared to many other professions has been slow to focus on 'the black box of instruction' in order to develop, identify and spread specific, high yield practices that are known to get results. Several of the chapters in this collection delve into these trends.

In sum, the big shift since 1997 has been an explicit focus on action — to action that addresses the whole system; to action that has both greater moral purpose and the means of fulfilling it. Moreover, we are seeing that the fundamental ideas embedded in these strategies have a sound basis in practice across all sectors — business, public entities (Fullan, 2008b).

What these developments have done is not so much solved the problem, but basically opened the door to considering more radical reform. I expect that in the next decade we will see more purposeful experiments in attempts to go wider as well as deeper.

In the meantime, this collection helps to pave the way. I provide more specific brief introductions to each of the three sections. The 'challenge of change' is everyone's favorite phrase these days. And for good reason. Never has the need been greater in education for reform that results in both individual and societal benefits.

Section One: Change Forces

There are large changes at work affecting all levels of the system. The four articles in this section provide a range of perspectives on the main issues.

In a project for Microsoft, Fullan, et al, developed an 'elite course' on leading change in which they identified eight major changes forces that all leaders would have to understand, contend with, and address in order to survive and thrive in addressing the complex change challenges into the 21st century.

Elmore and City take us on the 'road to school improvement'. Elmore, one of the most incisive analysts and actors in large-scale reform concludes that this road is "hard, bumpy and takes as long as it takes," and offers ideas for surviving the bumps and going to the next level.

Hargreaves and Shirley propose a 'fourth way' to reform, which in effect is "building from the bottom" and steering from the top.

Noguera takes us into the murky world of 'transforming urban high schools' and paints a dim picture of the challenges facing secondary schools, and then turns his attention to identifying promising pathways to success.

As a set, the four articles in Section One furnish a valuable context for the other three sections, each of which delves into each of the levels of tri-level reform.

Section Two: Instructional Focus at the School Level

As I said in the introduction, considerable progress has been made at the classroom and school level over the past decade. In the first two articles colleagues and I focus on school leadership and the link to 'breakthrough' results that we define as full success in achieving proficiency in literacy and numeracy for virtually all students. The evidence is that this will require shared leadership, a sharp focus on 'deprivatizing' classroom teaching in order to get at instructional improvement, deliberate daily use of diagnostic data, and school cultures where all teachers learn how to get better all the time.

DuFour and his colleagues reinforce these notions by showing how 'professional learning communities' involve deep and persistent changes in school cultures in order to focus on results through purposeful collaboration.

The work of change leaders is the basis of the final two articles. Knight's piece is on every-growing importance of coaches and mentors within schools — what I call 'second change agents' (the principal being the first change agent). Then Leithwood and his colleagues show how to develop and sustain school principals through networks and in individual development.

The work on the school principalship is especially crucial these days as principals are being case increasingly into the role of school saviors. In my own analysis the danger is that the role is becoming over-burdened with the combination of managerial and change demands, and therefore action must be taken by principals and by the system to prioritize and support principals (Fullan, 2008c).

Section Three: District Level

Schools as a group cannot move forward unless the district is part of the solution. The district is a crucial part of the infrastructure with respect to leadership development, capacity building, mobilization and use of data, and intervention.

The article by Fullan and Sharratt depicts one district's journey into sustaining leadership: York Region, a large multicultural district just north of Toronto has stayed the course in changing the culture of the district and its' 190 schools.

Childress and her colleagues at Harvard similarly have developed a compelling district-wide 'coherence framework' with an instructional core surrounded by a set of strategies, structures and resources required for district capacity building aimed at student learning and achievement.
There is no doubt that the role of the district in many jurisdictions is being recast along the line of the growing knowledge about multi-level reform. Once again it is neither top-down or bottom up that works but rather a coordinated partnership between the two levels.

Section Four: Large Scale Reform

Ben Levin (former Deputy Minister of Education in Ontario) and I teamed up to describe the Ontario strategy in the first article in this section. Think of this as the joint effort of an insider (Ben) and an outsider (me) change agent coming together in an applied strategic direction.

The other article in this section comes from Michael Barber. Starting as the architect of Tony Blair's first reform, and now active around the world including the U.S. in advising governments on system reform, Barber is hard-hitting and demanding as he urges systems to move from awful to adequate to good to great. Only the latter will save public school systems, and Barber identifies what systems need to achieve greatness in their performance.

We can expect to see more radical experiments on the part of states and governments as they push for more successful large-scale reform. The two articles in this section provide early examples of this new direction.

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