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Breaking News

ONTARIO'S NEW HEADMASTER

By: Alanna Mitchell

There's an old joke about Michael Fullan, the eminent educator, thinker, writer and dean emeritus of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, that goes like this: The only difference between Michael Fullan and God is that God is everywhere and Michael Fullan is everywhere but Ontario.

That's about to change. With the election this week of Dalton McGuinty as Ontario's next premier, the well-travelled Prof. Fullan and his ideas now are destined to be front and centre at home as well as abroad.

Education is a sore point in Canada's biggest province, and Mr. McGuinty says he plans to "harness a powerful force for successful education reform by the name of Michael Fullan," whom he considers "the single most talented individual" in the field.

By a quirk of fate, Mr. McGuinty came to know of Prof. Fullan outside the country. He had gone to Britain to examine large-scale education reforms being made there, and the name Fullan kept rolling off the tongues of admiring ministers and bureaucrats.

Although passionate about education (his wife Terri teaches Grade 4), Mr. McGuinty had never heard of the man. When he got back to Canada, he looked him up, read most of his best-selling books (such as *Leading in a Culture of Change*, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, *Change Forces with a Vengeance* and *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*) and examined what Prof. Fullan had done to help other countries (the United States and Australia as well as England) and parts of Canada (Manitoba and Ontario's York Region).

He was bowled over. One of the world's leading experts in education reform had an office not a dozen blocks from his own in downtown Toronto.

Even better, Prof. Fullan, 62, is about as far from a radical as a guru can be, a key concern for the leader of a diverse province where education has been an open wound for nearly a decade. The Fullan reputation has been made not by advocating quick shock treatment but by building consensus, inspiring teachers, explaining his own ideas fully and respecting those of others. The approach obviously appeals to Mr. McGuinty. "Michael Fullan has been an enormous influence on Dalton," says Charles Pascal, a former deputy education minister in Ontario (and the source of the Fullan joke). "You can't influence someone deeply unless that person is wide open and thirsty for information."

According to Mr. Pascal, Prof. Fullan is unusual — and valuable — because he knows how to put large-scale education change into place. It's one thing to dream; quite another to make things happen.

“With Dalton's vision and Michael's knowledge about implementation being put to practice at home, Ontario is going to have a very special opportunity,” Mr. Pascal says, adding that he thinks few people know just how much Mr. McGuinty “wants to be the best education premier since Bill Davis” (who governed the province from 1971 to 1985).

Prof. Fullan is excited too, although he cautions that he hasn't spent all that much time with members of the McGuinty camp since they knocked on his door. “I'm optimistic,” he said in an interview this week from Australia, where he is giving a series of keynote speeches and workshops — and being billed as “the leading international authority on reform in education.”

His optimism stems from his belief that Mr. McGuinty and his policy director, Gerald Butt, have done their homework and have more than a “Reader's Digest version” of what's at stake in Ontario's education system.

Just what is at stake? Prof. Fullan does not mince words.

Despite a lack of money and bad planning, the system is “not a disaster,” he says. But it could deteriorate “quite a lot” if steps are not taken soon. Teachers are burning out and few are applying to be principals. The gap between students who do well and those who do poorly is much too wide.

As well, there is not enough emphasis on what he calls “emotional intelligence,” by which he means developing the emotional abilities of young children. (Something Mr. McGuinty calls “character education.”) “When

emotional intelligence doesn't develop, the children don't learn and their social behaviour disrupts learning," Prof. Fullan explained.

At risk is Ontario's level of social cohesion, he said, even though the specialists know how to fix the educational system because of what has, and hasn't, worked in other countries. "We need people at a policy level who understand this," he added.

Prof. Fullan grew up in Toronto as the oldest of seven boys in a hockey-mad family. He became immersed in education quite by accident. His training made him an expert in the automobile industry and oil refining (he earned his doctorate by studying how workers react to new technology). But just as he was finishing his degree in 1968, OISE opened a sociology department, run by one of his favourite professors. So he signed on and started to apply his thinking to education, an area full of ideas but little practical implementation.

He has become most famous for his ability to synthesize huge amounts of research and literature and put it together in a way that teachers can grasp instantly, says Ben Levin, a professor of education at the University of Manitoba.

He is known for believing that reform requires both "pressure and support." You must make sure everyone in the system understands that it's vital to succeed — for example, make them show results but provide what they need to produce them.

His books have been translated into such languages as Mandarin, Spanish, Portuguese and Slovenian, and he has watched as efforts to reform education have grown from a single school to an entire level of government.

The proof that can work is in the English pudding. Dr. Pascal chuckles as he recalls handwritten note of effusive thanks he glimpsed in Prof. Fullan's office. It was signed, "Tony Blair."

British authorities summoned a group of Canadian academics to evaluate the intense efforts their schools have made in recent years to raise literacy and numeracy. It was a complex strategy, unusual in that, rather than just being presented with tests and told to make sure their students did well, teachers were given better teaching methods. As well, the reforms focused on poverty levels, nutrition and broader social effects on education.

By some measures, the campaign has succeeded. The percentage of 11-year-olds who reached the expected level in literacy rose to 75 per cent in 2002 from 63 per cent in 1997. In numeracy, the proportion rose to 73 per cent from 61 per cent.

More important, perhaps, the gap between very successful schools and much less successful schools narrowed dramatically .

So what does it mean for Ontario's students?

First, “a period of grace,” says OISE colleague Daniel Keating, a fellow of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, so that Prof. Fullan and the new government can start to untangle the dreadful knots in the system.

There will still be an emphasis on standardized testing and on adhering to a core curriculum, which means that students who come out of school ought to have at least some of the same classes. Class sizes will be smaller and teachers will have more support in the form of teaching assistants.

Beyond that, Mr. Pascal says, the focus likely will be on long-term, substantial improvement: “We've got to move beyond this big-bang approach where the government has to pretend it's doing something major by next Tuesday.”