

Meet Dalton's school guru



There's a 'buzz' in education. Michael Fullan's ideas about making change within school systems to improve student learning are being picked up around the world, reports **Moira MacDonald**

IF MICHAEL Fullan's predictions are right, we should start seeing signs as early as next May that Ontario's school system is improving.

Fullan is the 63-year-old former dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, hired in a most high-profile way last spring to advise would-be "Education Premier" Dalton McGuinty and his education minister Gerard Kennedy as they work to deliver on a promised 75% of students meeting provincial testing standards.

"It's great," Fullan tells me about the job at a recent launch for his latest educator-targeted book called *Leadership and Sustainability, System Thinkers in Action*. "We really feel that there's some opportunity here to make a difference in a lot of schools across the province."

If you can create "buzz" in education, Fullan's got it. His ideas about making change within school systems to improve student learning are being picked up around the world. Last week, despite having suffered a recent heart attack, he was in Hong Kong advising educators there in their own bid to improve student achievement.

His books are not recommended bedside reading for the average person, and they're not meant to be. But in their simplest form his ideas revolve around the proper support for educators mixed with the right amount of pressure on them to do a good job.

"There is a very strong accountability built in," Fullan tells me. "If you

just have accountability without respect for teachers, you get backlash. If you just respect teachers and give them all kinds of resources, there's no bite to it, there's no focus to it. That's why we try to give both."

He has some dozen books out, translated into eight languages — the latest had its Beijing launch last week, dovetailed onto the Hong Kong visit. He has been personally thanked by British Prime Minister Tony Blair for his work evaluating the success of a strategy to boost British schoolchildren's academic performance. Fullan is now involved in that reform's second phase. Already the Brits have done close to what Ontario proposes to do, by raising literacy rates among 11-year-olds from 63% achieving the standard in 1997 to 75% in 2002. In math skills the figure went from 61% to 73%.

But Fullan believes improvement does not need to take that long and is looking at ways to make that happen faster.

Literacy secretariat

A key focus for him in Ontario is setting up a literacy and numeracy secretariat, charged with identifying people expert in those areas who are already out in the field and then building up the ability for them to go out and spread what they know to other teachers — what Fullan calls "capacity building."

There are few official details about



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■ MICHAEL FULLAN, the 63-year-old former dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, will advise Premier Dalton McGuinty as they work to improve students' provincial testing results.

the secretariat (including how much it will cost) and it has already been criticized from a couple of diverse pockets as being another bureaucratic layer. But Fullan insists it won't be.

"We know that the people who are going to populate the secretariat are not bureaucratic," Fullan says. "They're going to operate in a way that supports, unleashes and helps develop the capacity that's out there, because we can't run it from the centre."

'Talk-back' power

Speaking of the centre, Fullan is no advocate of overthrowing school boards or letting individual schools go on their merry way, being masters of their own destinies — he doesn't think that will help kids. But he does believe in schools getting more independence (what he calls "talk-back" power) while still remaining linked to a wider school community — not the situation in Ontario now, he believes. He wants schools to feel a greater responsibility to helping each other as well as having access to what works in other places.

The proof of whether his ideas will work in Ontario or not "will be in the pudding." As for the still hazy secretariat, "you can criticize the concept, but I'd rather people criticized the action," he says. Once his strategies have had a chance to start working, "I'll take the complaints and I will take them very seriously."

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