Whole school reform: Problems and Promises

Michael Fullan

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

University of Toronto

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This paper provides a brief review of what is involved in achieving whole school reform on a large scale. There have been two shifts in the last decade that are directly relevant to this question. One has been the issue of how to go deeper to achieve substantial reform that is powerful enough to impact student learning in even the most difficult circumstances. The other is how simultaneously to go wider to achieve reform on a large scale.

This paper is divided into four sections: (1) timelines for turning around schools and school systems, (2) value and limitations of what is known as whole school reform models, (3) the importance of school capacity, and (4) reforming the infrastructure.

1. Timelines

In our own work and in our review of other cases, we have been interested in how long it takes to turn around a poor performing school or district to one which evidences good performance. (Fullan, 2001a) The short answer is 3-6-8 years; that is, it takes about three years to turn around an elementary school, six years for a high school and eight years for a district. By turn around I mean a significant increase in student achievement.

As valid as these findings are there are three problems. First, when problems are urgent, as they are, the above timelines are considered to be too long. People might ask can these timelines be reduced, say, cut in half. The answer is yes. By more intensive use of 'the Change Knowledge' we can accelerate the process and reduce the timelines. We have some recent evidence that substantial progress can be made in schools in two years, and in districts in three years, and even in whole nations. For example, while it took District 2 in New York

City about eight years (from 1988 to 1996) to significantly improve literacy and numeracy, it appears that San Diego (a much larger district) using the same strategies, but more intensively, is getting good results in three or four years. (Fullan, 2001b). Even more impressive is England's dramatic improvement in literacy and numeracy. In 20,000 schools (all elementary schools) the percentage improvement from 1996-2000 in achieving proficiency in literacy has risen from 57% of all 11 year olds in 1996 to 75% in 2000; for mathematics the gain has been from 54% to 72% (see Fullan, 2001 a, ch. 13).

The second problem is that only a small proportion of schools and districts who should be engaged in this kind of successful reform are so involved. Thus, there is a problem of going to scale.

The third problem concerns sustainability. It takes a great deal of effort to accomplish the turnaround which can be undone almost overnight when two or three key leaders leave. In other words, even when results have been achieved in three to eight years they are not necessarily sustained beyond one or two leadership periods. I will return to the issue of sustainability in the concluding section.

2. Whole School Reform Models

Schools have been plagued by piecemeal innovations which come and go as ad hoc initiatives. One answer has been the development and implementation of Whole School Reform models which involve school-wide reform (see Berends et al, 2001). There are some ten models which have been designated as potentially worthwhile models to adopt (Success

for All, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, CO-NECT Schools to name a few). These models by and large have what I will call I will call short-term value, but they contain a fatal flaw if long term success is the criterion. In the short-run they provide a focus, well-developed designs and support for implementation, and in many cases evidence of impact on student learning. As a whole they represent some of the best advances in school reform in the past quarter of a century, but as I shall argue later, adopting models is not the main point. The main point is reculturing the professional community at the school level, and transforming the infrastructure supporting and directing schools.

The flaw of whole school reform model is hidden in their implementation track record. Datnow and Stringfield have provided useful insights into the issues of implementation. In one study of 16 initiatives involving over 300 schools, they observe:

> In several of our studies we found that educators adopted reform models without thinking through how the model would suit their school's goals, culture, teachers or student…even when opportunities to gather information were available, educators seldom made well-informed choices about reform designs…
>
> Policy and political decisions at state and district levels also often influenced schools' adoption of external reform designs, which also caused some local educators to adopt models quickly and without careful consideration of "fit." (p.191)

Their findings also speak to support for implementation:

> We found that clear, strong district support positively impacted reform implementation, and the lack thereof often negatively impacted implementation…schools that sustained reforms had district and state allies that protected reform efforts during periods of transition or crisis and secured resources (money, time, staff and space) essential to reforms…schools that failed to sustain reforms were sometimes located in districts that were "infamous for experimenting with new kinds of programs" but did not provide ongoing support for any of them. (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000, pp. 194-195)

There are problems of continuation even in the face of initial successful implementation. In one study of eight schools only three "had clearly moved toward institutionalizing their reforms" (p 196). In another study of one district, Datnow and Stringfield (2000) report:

> By the third year of our four-year study, only one of thirteen schools were still continuing to implement their chosen reform designs. Reforms expired in six schools. A significant challenge to the sustainability of reforms…was the instability of district leadership and the politics that accompanied it. In 1995-1996 [the] then-superintendent actively, publicly promoted the use of externally developed reforms. During his tenure, the district created an Office of Instructional Leadership to support the designs' implementation. The following year, however, a new district administration eliminated this office, and district support for many of the restructuring schools decreased dramatically. (p.198)

The largest study of whole school reform models is currently being conducted by RAND (Berends et al, 2001). In 1995 Rand began an evaluation of the scale-up of approved designs. There are now some 3, 000 schools that have adopted approved whole school reform models. The most recent Rand findings reveal:

- There are large differences in implementation both across jurisdictions and design teams;

- There are problems of stability over time;

- There is considerable variability in implementation within schools (Berends et al, 2001, p. 11).

One could conclude that the solution to the above implementation problems would be to strengthen the commitment and conditions necessary for initial and continued support, but this view masks the fundamental problem. As long as you have external models coming and going there will never be more than a small proportion of schools and districts involved, and any pockets of success will be short-lived. Let me be very clear about this fundamental point. First, the primary goal of school reform is not to adopt or even internalize a valuable

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external model. The primary goal is to alter the *capacity* of the school to engage in

improvement. Second, sustainable reform of this kind can only be achieved when working

with *whole systems*. By whole systems I mean an entire school district, state, or country. By

and large the 3000 whole school reform models are not operating in whole systems

(Memphis district was an exception) but rather in pieces of systems, i.e., in individual

schools.

Combining these two criteria — school capacity and system sustainability — is the focus of

the rest of this paper. You can't get serious reform without an increase in school capacity,

and you can't get an increase in school capacity without transforming the system

infrastructure. Whole school reform models possibly could be one stepping stone in this

direction, but they do not represent the solution.

3.School Capacity

Thus, my argument is that you have to strengthen the fundamentals, starting with school

capacity. Newmann et al (2000) defined school capacity as consisting of:

(1) Teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions

(2) Professional community

(3) Program coherence

(4) Technical resources

(5) Principal leadership

Basically, they claim, with backing from case studies, that professional development often

focuses on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of teachers as *individual* staff members.

This is the first component of school capacity. Obviously this is important and can make a

difference in individual classrooms, but it is not sufficient (never send a changed individual into an unchanged culture).

In addition, there must be *organization* development because social or relationship resources are key to school improvement. Thus, schools must combine individual development with the development of *schoolwide professional communities,* the second element of capacity.

However, individual development combined with professional communities is still not sufficient, unless it is channelled in a way that combats the fragmentation of multiple innovations by working on *program coherence*, "the extent to which the school's programs for student and staff learning are coordinated, focused on clear learning goals, and sustained over a period of time" (Newmann et al., 2000, p. 5). This third element, program coherence is organizational integration.

Fourth, instructional improvement requires additional *resources* (materials, equipment, space, time, and access to expertise).

Fifth, school capacity is seriously undermined if it does not have quality leadership. Put differently, *the role of the principal is to cause the previous four factors to get better and better.* Elmore (2000) agrees:

> [T]he job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result. (p. 15)

To Newmann et al's list of school capacity I would add the ability of schools to develop a strong mutually influential relationship with the community. In any case, my point is that

Whole school reform models are at best short-term solutions because they do not directly work on the basic school capacities just described. The case could be made that strong implementation of given models will indeed strengthen the capacities identified by Newmann et al, but there is no evidence that this is the case. My conclusion, in other words, is focus on the fundamentals. If you are going to adopt a whole school reform model make sure that it is part and parcel of strengthening the school capacity as I just defined it. I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that whole school models have no value. And they often do make a contribution to capacity, but I maintain that this contribution will always be short-lived (models come and go, and the whole systems are not involved).

I should also take up the role of the high school, since the clearest examples of school capacity are at the elementary level. One of the best studies of high schools was recently conducted by McLaughin & Talbert (2001). They investigated the role of professional learning communities in 16 high schools in California and Michigan. What they found was confirmatory and revealing as they got inside complex high schools more specifically than other researchers have. They suggest that there are three patterns of teaching practice:

1. Enacting traditions of practice (in which traditional subject-based teaching occurs, and only traditional students succeed).

2. Lowering expectations and standards (in which teachers water-down subjects in the face of low-motivated students, which has limited success).

3. Innovating to engage learners (in which subjects and teaching are considered by dynamic in order to involve all students, which leads to greater learning by all).

Enacting traditions meant that teachers taught as they always did. In lowering expectations,

teachers tend to locate the problem in the student, as in the following comment from a math

teacher:

> Oh man, you just sit here and you think how can anybody be that stupid…how can
> they be this damn stupid. The kid is where the problem is today. There is nothing
> wrong with the curriculum. If I could just get people that wanted to learn, then I could
> teach and everything would be wonderful. (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, p. 13)

By contrast, innovating to engage students involves

> teachers [who] move beyond or outside established frames for instruction to find or
> develop content and classroom strategies that will enable students to master core
> subject concepts…..
> An English teacher uses writing groups; a math teacher creates groups of three ["no
> more that that," he advises], a science teacher has all but abandoned texts to connect
> students through lab-based group projects. (pp. 17, 20)

McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) found that "a collaborative community of practice in which

teachers share instructional resources and reflections in practice appears essential to their

persistence and success in innovating classroom practice" (p. 22). In other words, teachers

who were successful with all students, especially those traditionally turned off by school,

were constantly figuring out and sharing what works. More to the point here, these teachers

"taught in schools and departments with a strong *professional community* engaged in making

innovations that support student and teacher learning and success" (p. 34, emphasis in

original).

Overall, McLaughlin and Talbert found that most high school departments lacked a culture of

sharing and jointly developing practice. But they found some exceptions, such as differences

between departments *within* the same school, whole high schools that were more

collaborative. In one school, for example:

Oak Valley's English department has the strongest technical culture of any department in our sample while the same school's social studies department ranks among the weakest. (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, p. 47)

A veteran English teacher at Oak Valley comments:

It's everyday practice that teachers are handing [out] sample lessons they've done, or an assignment that they've tried, and [discussed] when it worked [or] how they would do it differently. Or a new teacher joins the staff and instantly they are paired up with a couple of buddies…and file drawers and computer disks and everything are just made readily available. (p.50)

In contrast, teachers in the social studies department speak of "my materials" but never mention their colleagues as resources.

Most revealing is that teachers talk about students with radically different assumptions about learning. English teachers' comments are uniformly positive: "We have excellent students, cooperative, and there's good rapport with the teachers." A Social Studies teacher in turn says, "The kids—there's no quest for knowledge. Not all, but that's in general… it's not important to them. They just don't want to learn." Note that these teachers are talking about the *same* students!

McLaughlin and Talbert sum up Oak Valley's two departments:

In the social studies department, autonomy means isolation and reinforces the norms of individualism and conservatism. In the English department, professional autonomy and strong community are mutually reinforcing, rather than oppositional. Here collegial support and interaction enable individual teachers to reconsider and revise their classroom practice confidently because department norms are mutually negotiated and understood. (p. 55)

McLaughlin and Talbert show what a dramatic difference these experiences have for the motivation and career commitments of teachers:

When teachers from the Oak Valley English and Social Studies departments told us how they feel about their job, it was hard to believe that they teach in the same

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school. Oak Valley English teachers of all pedagogical persuasions express pride in their department and pleasure in their workplace: "Not a day goes by that someone doesn't say how wonderful it is to work here," said one. In contrast, social studies teachers, weary of grappling alone with classroom tensions, verbalize bitterness and professional disinvestment. Several plan to leave the school or the profession. (pp. 83-84)

McLauglin and Talbert conducted research not intervention. The implications, however, can be drawn out. First, in recent analyses focussing on successful case studies in business and in education I found that strategies and mechanisms for 'creating and sharing knowledge' are crucial in all successful cases (Fullan, 2001b). All schools, and especially high schools are notoriously weak at sharing knowledge. Second, it may not be possible to create learning communities in the large-scale industrial models of high schools (1500-3000 students or more) which we have inherited. In this sense, reculturing (increasing school capacity) and restructuring (e.g., reducing the size and structure of high schools) may have to go hand-in-hand.

Finally, I would emphasize that school capacity, when it is studied, usually produces only a snapshot at one point in time, and a snapshot that does not adequately capture the district and state context. We can, however, draw references about the impact of district and state infrastructure on school capacity. Intentions aside, in the vast majority of cases the infrastructure not only does not help, it often (presumably unwittingly) makes matters worse (see Fullan, 2001a. ch.10 on the district and ch. 13 on the government). Hatch (2000) found that multiple innovations frequently collide; Hess, (1999) talks about 'policy churn' and 'spinning wheels' in reference to the instability of school boards.

One of the main starting points, then, is to identify the problem as one of 'overcoming dysfunctional leadership and policies' at the district and state level. Why is this important? Because it is not possible to accomplish large-scale, sustainable reform in the absence of the active involvement of the infrastructure.

4. Overcoming Dysfunctional Infrastructures

I have just concluded that it is impossible to get large-scale reform without a dramatic improvement in the infrastructure — the policies, practices and structure at the district and state levels. At the present time, not only does the infrastructure not help, it actually produces fragmentation and overload (Fullan 2001a).

The overarching point is that large-scale reform requires what I am going to call an 'accountability pillar' and a 'capacity-building pillar'. The former refers to standards of performance, transparency of results, monitoring of progress, and consequential action. Capacity-building concerns training, resources (time, expertise & materials) and incentive-based compensation as well as recognition for accomplishments. These pressure and support pillars must act in concert in order to produce large-scale reform. When done effectively, integrating pressure and support with a focus on results for students creates pride, greater trust, and tremendous motivation and energy.

To take the district as one example, districts that organize their efforts around student achievement (e.g. literacy and mathematics), and mobilize all schools towards this and show remarkable progress. District 2 in New York City, Memphis, San Diego (in recent years) all show what this design and process looks like. Fink & Resnick (2001) provide a very clear

description of the role of the principal. In these cases, it is the district's infrastructure that has bean realigned and strengthened to propel, support and respond to school development. Thus, large-scale improvement requires new and different two-way relationships between each school and the district, and new relationships across schools as the district develops a new professional learning culture in the entire district. This involves, if you like, reculturing the district.

Further, sustained reform is not possible unless the larger state infrastructure is also transformed. Most states have readily taken on the accountability pillar, few have addressed capacity-building. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in England is an exception, (we are conducting a four-year evaluation of this initiative). England has achieved remarkable gains in literacy and numeracy over a four-year period (1997-2001). Incidentally, the state infrastructure must be altered in *specific* ways (e.g., to support explicitly given focuses like literacy and mathematics); it must also be developed in what I am going to call *generic* ways, most particularly with respect to policies, programs and structures to develop the *teaching profession*, and similar policies and programs to foster new leadership with respect to principals, superintendents and teacher leaders.

5. What to Do

The current dilemma is that the infrastructure is dysfunctional, yet infrastructure is essential to large-scale sustainable reform. Furthermore, we are at the early stages of tackling this problem so that there are few if any models of how to go about this reform. There are some preliminary examples at the district level (District 2, San Diego) and at the state level

(England) but these are not yet fully developed. In this brief paper I will suggest four of the

crucial elements that would form this agenda:

1. Get the conception right;

2. Focus as much attention on district and state reform as on school capacity;

3. Invest in leadership at all levels;

4. Form permanent endowments

First, the conception of reform needs to be developed, and constantly refined. It is one of

'Coordinated Decentralization'. It is a corporate-wide change model applied across many

plants (schools). In this sense, business and educational reform have much in common

(Fullan 2001b). In a corporate-wide model decentralization and self-managing change are

valued but they are played out with constant interaction and identity with the corporation as a

whole. For example, in such a model, the school principal should be just as concerned with

the fate of other schools (i.e., the district as a whole) as with his or her own school.

Purposeful interaction or what we call 'learning in context' fosters district-wide identity as it

increases the capacity of all (see Fink and Resnick, 2001; Fullan 2001b). Thus, the goal is to

constantly foster shared identity with room to be innovative.

Second, schools have received a great deal of attention over the past decade or more, and

rightly so. Now, we need to balance this with the same kind of attention on district and state

policies, programs and practices insofar as they help or hinder school capacity. We need to

reorganize the role of the district and district leadership so that it focuses primarily on

instruction, building capacity at the school level, fostering lateral exchanges across schools,

and the like. We also need to institute regular feedback from schools (e.g., from principals)

as to how the role of the district and state helps or hinders reform. There should be regular assessments of school capacity and performance as well as regular assessments of the role of the district.

Third, there needs to be a tremendous investment in school and teacher leadership, and district leadership if we are to scale-up. If we do not do this we will continue the current trend which is to find that leadership is critical to success, but that highly effective leadership is always in the minority (about 20% of the schools and districts), and never sustained. Until leadership is widespread, we will never get more than episodic, small-scale success.

Fourth, with all the tens of millions going into district reform we have to ask whether one-shot expenditures (even over five years) will ever leave any lasting residue. We need an increase in investment on a permanent basis. This means that states need to invest more in capacity-building, but we should consider whether states and foundations could also match contributions in order to establish permanent endowments that would provide support (for example for leadership development) on a continuous basis. For example, one could take a percentage of large scale investments from external sources and have them matched — say $10 million from a foundation, matched by $10 million from a state or district to form a permanent endowment to support capacity building on an ongoing basis.

These are only four ideas for addressing the issues. The bottom line is that if we do not fundamentally improve the district and state infrastructure in tandem with school improvement, we will never get large scale, sustained reform. The next few years provide a critical opportunity to try and get this right.

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