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TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS AN ENTIRE SYSTEM AT A TIME

Improving education is at the top of many governments' agendas. Recent large-scale efforts yield useful lessons for relatively quick whole-system reform.

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The deliberate attempt to use "change knowledge" to bring about whole-system reform in schools is barely 15 years old. By change knowledge, I mean ideas and strategies that cause the system to move forward in performance, especially when it comes to raising the bar and closing the gap for all students. By whole-system reform, I mean all schools in the state, province, or country, and all levels from local to intermediate and state.

My colleagues and I began to get some clear ideas of the do's and don'ts of large-scale reform when a group of us evaluated the literacy-numeracy reform that was launched by the United Kingdom in 1997—large scale to be sure, as it addressed the performance of the over 20,000 primary schools in England. We drew four lessons from this partially successful reform effort, two negative and two positive.

First, on the negative side, we found that depending too heavily on targets turns out to be a distraction. England had set as targets 80 percent for literacy and 75 percent for numeracy from a starting base of some 60 percent. They did progress to about 75 percent, but then for various reasons leveled off and declined in subsequent years. Overreliance on quantitative targets turns out to be a temporary boost at best. Second, a negative approach to accountability— name, shame, and improve—also turns out to be of questionable use in the mid to long term.

On the positive side of the equation, two components did turn out to have strong value. One was *focus* and the other was *capacity building*. Focus meant selecting core educational-improvement goals and staying with them relentlessly. Capacity building consisted of strategies that systematically developed the skills, resources, and motivation of individuals and groups to put

in the effort to get results, as well as to sustain that improvement effort.

During this same period, stimulated in part by the introduction of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), governments around the world developed an interest in the state of school-system performance and how to improve it. Biannually since the year 2000, PISA has been assessing the performance of 15-year-olds in literacy, math, and science starting with the 30-plus OECD countries and then rapidly expanding to the current number of close to 70 countries. The question is now front and center: how do you improve all systems in reasonably short periods of time, such as 6 to 10 years?

In this short article, I do not attempt to answer this question in detail. Rather, my goal is to give some directional advice and illustrate what that advice looks like in practice. There are at least four dilemmas that must be continuously addressed:

1. The *accountability* dilemma
2. The *policy-overload* dilemma
3. The *capacity-building* dilemma
4. The *sustainability* dilemma

The key to understanding accountability is to realize that no system that relies primarily on external control can be sustained. Therefore policy makers must design, monitor, and improve systems that ensure built-in accountability on the part of the implementers. The idea is to achieve forms of accountability that are based on both internal commitments to the users of the system and on commitments to the public. We have found that effective accountability is first a function of good data used primarily as a strategy for improvement, second a degree of "nonjudgmentalism" that reduces the culture of blame, third widespread transparency about results and about what's working and not working, and last a

drive to intervene in order to build capacity for progress.

Policy overload happens when governments fall into the trap of developing plans that are too complex, too vague, and contain too many priorities. Policy overload results in a lack of focus, fragmented priorities, and a sense of an endless stream of ad hoc initiatives. Successful reform plans are designed as much for the implementers—that is, the teachers and school and district leaders— as they are for the planners themselves. The overall plan must be actionable, reasonably clear, and lead to widespread ownership.

The centerpiece of all successful whole-system reform cases is capacity building—the development of individual and group efficacy when it comes to new skills, resources, and motivation. Put another way, all the failures we observed had a weak capacity-building core. In fact, governments tend to underestimate the need for capacity building or try to address it in weak, individualistic ways. The bottom line for those engaged in whole-system reform is that the core strategy must focus on thorough and widespread capacity building, especially the collective capacity of groups.

The fourth issue is sustainability. If a transformation program addresses the first three dilemmas successfully, it is most likely well on its way to greater sustainability. Focus, integrating accountability and capacity building, and developing widespread leadership relative to the agenda all contribute to greater sustainability. Widespread leadership includes leaders developing other leaders to carry out the core agenda.

There is no single model for addressing whole-system reform. Particular models will vary according to the starting point and context. For example, if a system has extremely low capacity and is very large in size, as is the case for many developing countries, it will call for certain approaches that are more direct

at the early stages. Below I address the core attributes of the whole-system reform model we developed in Ontario, which has achieved widespread success since 2004. The value of this model has been documented by several external case studies, and the model is based on a good deal of research and evidence from around the world.

The Ontario case

Ontario is Canada's largest province, home to over 13 million people and a public education system with roughly 2 million students, 120,000 educators, and 5,000 schools. As recently as 2002, this system was stagnant by virtually any measure of performance. In October 2003, a new provincial government (Canada has no federal agency or jurisdiction in education) was elected with a mandate and commitment to transform it.

Improvements began within a year, and some eight years later, the province's 900 high schools have shown an increase in graduation rates from 68 percent (2003–04) to 82 percent (2010–11), while reading, writing, and math results have gone up 15 percentage points across its 4,000 elementary schools since 2003. Fewer teachers and principals leave the profession in the first few years, and achievement gaps have been substantially narrowed for low-income students, the children of recent immigrants, and special-education students. In short, the entire system has dramatically improved.

In brief, the strategy consisted of assertive goals and high expectations from the government, combined with a commitment to partner with the education sector in order to develop capacity and ownership in the service of student achievement. The key factors were:

AN "A" FOR IMPROVEMENT A science teacher holds class in Toronto. High-school graduation rates in Ontario, where the city is based, climbed almost 15 percent after the province enacted sweeping reforms.

1. Relentless and focused leadership at the center (in this case, the Ontario government)
2. A small number of ambitious goals, specifically higher levels of literacy and numeracy and improved high-school graduation rates
3. A positive stance toward the schools, districts, and teachers
4. A core strategy of capacity building to improve the quality of instruction
5. Transparency of results and use of data for improvement purposes
6. A nonpunitive approach to accountability
7. Learning from implementation, by disseminating best practices both vertically and across schools and districts
8. Fostering leadership at all levels to drive and support items 1–7

The conclusion to be drawn is that systems will be successful if they focus on a small number of key strategic elements, deploy them in concert, build capacity on the part of the implementers, persist with the process over time, and monitor and learn as they go in relation to actual results and effective practices. ∎