

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *Introduction to* **The Challenge of Change**

### *Purposeful Action at Work*

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 office 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 from 62% to 73% in numeracy 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.

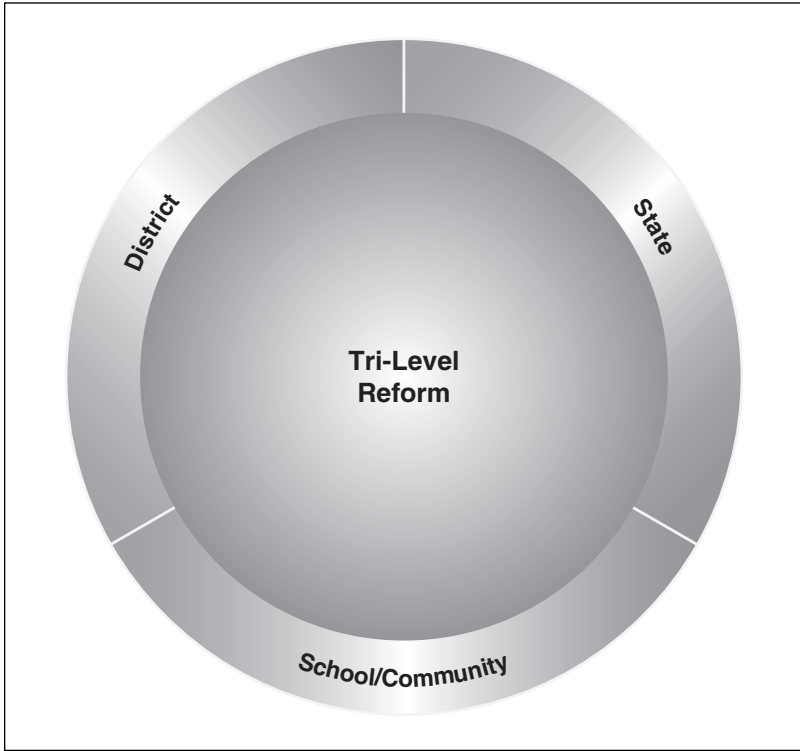
My point is that the effort in England was a kind of coming out of change knowledge from the domain of research to the domain of action. Much of this knowledge incidentally has been chronicled and captured in the fourth edition of *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (Fullan, 2007).

## **TRI-LEVEL REFORM**

We have come to call this approach to system change *tri-level reform* (see Figure 1.1).

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 the 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 requires two things: a 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

**Figure 1.1** Tri-Level Reform

obtainable, is to establish a system of not only greater alignment across the three levels but, even more important, 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 two million students, 4,000 elementary schools, and 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 implemented 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 has improved to 75%—still not full success but strong and continuing progress.

Details of the Ontario strategy are contained in Chapter 13 of this book, but I can provide here the basic assumptions and components of the strategy (see Figure 1.2).

The six components in Figure 1.2 work together. Direction and sector engagement involves direction from the top combined with

**Figure 1.2** A Theory of Action for System Reform



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 it. This occurs at all three levels—school leaders, district staff, and state or province department staff.

Fourth, and equally important, is a commitment to manage the distractions. In complex political systems, distractions 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 and 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. 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 (Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006). 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—action that addresses the whole system, 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 and public entities alike (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 remaining three sections. The “challenge of change” is everyone’s favorite phrase these days. And for good reason. Never in education has the need been greater for reform that results in both individual and societal benefits.

## REFERENCES

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