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System-wide improvement in education

Ben Levin, University of Toronto

13

Education policy series



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The booklets have been: (a) focused on policy topics that the Academy considers to be of high priority across many ministries of education – in both developed and developing countries; (b) structured for clarity – containing an introductory overview, a research-based discussion of around 10 key issues considered to be critical to the topic of the booklet, and references that provide supporting evidence and further reading related to the discussion of issues; (c) restricted in length – requiring around 30–45 minutes of reading time; and (d) sized to fit easily into a jacket pocket or to be read online – providing opportunities for readily accessible consultation inside or outside the office.

The authors of the series were selected by the International Academy of Education because of their expertise concerning the booklet topics, and also because of their recognized ability to communicate complex research findings in a manner that can be readily understood and used for policy purposes.

The booklets will appear first in English, and may be published in other languages. Two or more booklets will be published each year and made freely available for download from the websites of the International Academy of Education and IIEP. A limited printed edition will also be prepared shortly after electronic publication.



This booklet

New understandings about the contribution that education can make to economic and social outcomes for diverse populations are driving the present policy impetus for schooling improvement. However, reports of failed educational reform efforts continue to come in from around the world. What seem to be common-sense policies result in unproductive change or unintended consequences. Even when based on evidence about ‘what works’, policies often fail because insufficient attention is paid to the ‘how’ of implementation. This booklet brings together emerging evidence about how to bring about lasting, system-wide improvement in schooling performance.

Contributors to the American Educational Research Association’s Handbook of Education Policy Research highlight the chasm to be bridged before research evidence becomes a productive resource for policy and improvement. Professor Ben Levin is a rarity in that his experience positions him astride this chasm; an esteemed international scholar in educational policy research, he has led system-wide improvement as Deputy Minister (Chief Executive Officer) of a policy ministry.

While knowledge mobilization for educational improvement is a relatively new field, Levin draws upon the research and scholarship of many, including most notably Michael Fullan, who are working to harness research findings for this purpose. He also draws on the Canadian Province of Ontario’s recent experience as a case study in successful, system-wide improvement.

Leaders and scholars who have been involved in policy leadership for reform in other jurisdictions have provided valuable critique and advice that will strengthen the relevance of this booklet for decision-makers in different contexts. These include Professor Emeritus Michael Fullan, Special Advisor to the Premier and Minister of Education in Ontario; Professor Andreas Demetriou, former Minister of Education in Cyprus; Howard Fancy, former CEO of the New Zealand Ministry of Education; Gatoloaifa’aana Tilianamua Afamasaga of the National University in Samoa; and Sir Michael Barber, formerly Chief Advisor to the Secretary of State for Education and Prime Minister in England, and co-author of the McKinsey Report ‘How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better’ (Mourshed, Chijioke, and Barber, 2010). Professor Lorin Anderson, whose research has focused on the quality of education provided for children of poverty throughout the world, has also provided valuable input.

The eight principles found in this booklet, all derived from the emerging research, offer practical advice for those with an interest in accelerating lasting, system-wide schooling improvement. Levin illustrates the principles with examples from Ontario, a province with a diverse population that includes many indigenous communities. Students in Ontario come from numerous language groups; almost 30 per cent of the province's population was born outside of Canada, and many urban schools in Ontario serve students of 30 or more different ethnicities.

The booklet emphasizes the importance of a capacity building and inquiry orientation to change.

Ben Levin

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Introduction



It has long been recognized that education plays an important role in building societies that are economically and socially strong. In most countries, this recognition is first apparent in the expansion of access to primary and secondary education. But accessibility alone is not enough, and once achieved, countries turn their attention to improving quality, increasing equity of participation, and raising outcomes for target groups. Efforts in these directions have typically struggled, and many large-scale reform programmes have produced limited or no results.

My focus in this booklet is on what has been learned over the last 20 years about effective, large-scale improvement in the quality of school systems. Fortunately, an increasing body of empirical work and a strong network of international researchers (e.g. Hopkins, 2007) now support this field. We have as crucial evidence the experience of a number of countries that have dramatically increased their education performance over time. Also useful are the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) various comparative studies, not just the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reports, but also the studies on teachers (OECD, 2005), equity (Field, Kuczera, and Pont, 2007) and vocational education (OECD, 2010). Two reviews by McKinsey, comparing education systems around the world (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Mourshed, Chijioke, and Barber, 2010), make an important contribution. Nevertheless, the evidence we have at this point does not allow for definitive conclusions; we still have much to learn about what it takes to build and maintain high-quality, mass education systems.

This much is certain: achieving real and lasting improvement in student outcomes takes a sustained effort to change teaching and learning practices in thousands and thousands of classrooms, and this in turn requires focused and sustained effort by all parts of the education system and its partners. Key aspects of this collaborative effort include careful attention to goal-setting, positive engagement, capacity building, effective communication, learning from research and innovation, maintaining focus in the midst of multiple pressures, and use of resources. Effective large-scale change requires careful attention to implementation as well as policy, and to the building of an implementation system that is up to the task of bringing about the necessary changes in daily practice.

The points in this booklet are illustrated with brief examples from Ontario, Canada, a jurisdiction of 13 million people

and 2 million students that has been working on these issues since 2004, with significant improvement in all its educational outcomes. For example, according to the Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), which administers provincial tests, 70 per cent of elementary school students are now achieving high levels of literacy and numeracy, up from 55 per cent a few years ago. The number of low-performing schools has also dropped significantly. The Ministry of Education reports that high school graduation has increased from 68 per cent in 2004 to 82 per cent in 2011. In 2011 Ontario was, for the first time, the highest performing province in Canada on the Pan-Canadian Achievement Programme tests (www.cmec.ca). At the same time, teacher attrition in Ontario dropped significantly. The fuller story is told in Levin (2008).¹

The proposals in this booklet will need, of course, to be adapted for use in other national or sub-national contexts. Much of the research – and this discussion – assumes a sound basic education system with enough provision, reasonably capable teachers, and adequate facilities. It also assumes a stable government, a reasonable degree of social cohesion, an absence of corruption, and other such conditions. Where these are not in place, the strategies in this booklet may not be applicable or will at least require adaptation. The intent here is not to provide a recipe for use in all settings, but a set of principles that can be adapted to work in almost any setting.

This booklet focuses on general strategies for improvement. Many specific issues also require attention, for example, teacher training, financial organization, engagement of parents, and making effective use of technology. Although important, these are beyond the scope of this discussion.

Although change knowledge is increasingly being used internationally, its future is not secure because the work is hard and runs counter to demands for approaches that can be quickly and simply implemented or that are based on a particular ideology. Moreover, few ministries of education actually have the capacity to provide the necessary supports for improvement, so changes there are also required.

1. Ontario's PISA results do not yet show this impact, as students who wrote PISA in 2009 were not affected by the reforms, which only extended to Grade 6 for the first few years.

Background



Creating change in education is easy. Many governments have done it by changing funding or policies or governance structures. But change is not the same as improvement, and our interest is change strategies that create lasting improvement in terms of a broad range of student outcomes. The challenge for education systems around the world, regardless of their current situations, can be expressed this way: Bringing more students than ever before to higher levels of achievement than ever before, on a broader range of skills and attributes than ever before, with less inequity in outcomes than ever before.

This is much harder than simply creating change, and many reform programmes have tried but failed (Levin and Fullan, 2008). Some have actually made things worse, most notably by narrowing the focus of schools or increasing inequity of outcomes. However, we do now also have quite a few examples of success, and much has been learned about how to create meaningful and sustainable improvement across a school system. If this knowledge can be disseminated more widely, more governments may turn away from the somewhat simplistic approaches that are often advocated.

An effective, system-wide change strategy requires the following elements:

1. a small number of ambitious yet achievable and well-grounded goals, publicly stated;
2. a positive stance on improving all schools and success for all students;
3. an emphasis on capacity building and a focus on results;
4. multi-level engagement with strong leadership and a 'guiding coalition';
5. continuous learning through innovation and effective use of research and data;
6. a focus on key strategies while also managing other interests and issues;
7. effective use of resources;
8. a strong implementation effort to support the change process.

Goals and targets

Schools are expected to be all things to all people, but improvement in a large and complex system requires an unrelenting focus on a few things at a time. To engender public interest and to create a system focus, governments need to identify a few (two to four) key goals and set specific targets for improvement. Trying to improve everything at the same time inevitably leads to dispersion of effort, burnout, and failure to achieve anything worthwhile. Many systems have lists of 10 to 15 goals, virtually guaranteeing that none will get adequate attention.

It is important to start with goals that are salient in the public mind – these typically relate to such matters as elementary school literacy, high school graduation, or student safety. Even more importantly, key goals must be educationally sound; that is, they must clearly relate to factors that make a difference to young people's life chances. A good standard of literacy, for example, is a prerequisite for achievement in all other domains of motivation and learning, whether in or out of school. Similarly, completing secondary school or some other form of basic qualification is a prerequisite for further learning and participation in the labour market.

Goals need to be ambitious yet realistic. Ambition is important because organizations will often aim low in an effort to protect themselves. The levels of educational achievement now common in the developed world would have been regarded as wildly unlikely even 50 years ago. But setting impossible goals, such as all students reaching a high level of proficiency, is equally unhelpful. It's a matter of balance.

Goals must be public and they must be measurable in some way, so that progress can be meaningfully reported. Concerns about the potential distorting impact of public targets need to be taken seriously. However, in this age of political cynicism, public education needs to be able to provide clear evidence that outcomes are improving, and this evidence must be in a form that is readily communicated to, and understood by, people whose knowledge of the subtleties of education is limited. Without such evidence, people will not want to commit their children or their money to public schools.

While it is crucial to have a small number of goals with measures, there are associated dangers. One is that the measure can displace the goal. For example, achievement on a literacy test (a measure) may displace literacy (the goal). It is important to remind people that the focus has to be on literacy (or whatever the goal may be), not test preparation; good test scores unsupported by real skills are worth little.

Coaching for tests should be actively discouraged. It needs to be made unambiguously clear that the path to good results is through a strong, rich, and broad instructional programme with high levels of student engagement.

A second danger is that the focus narrows to include only the key goals and that, to make more time for, say, literacy, other activities are discontinued. This is bad practice because an education should be well rounded, and complementary areas such as art, music, and physical activity can actually strengthen key skills such as literacy (Deasy, 2002).

Finally, it is vital to avoid connecting measurement results with sanctions or incentives of various kinds, as this inevitably leads to cheating. Results are important to inform planning but they should not be used to impose punishments on either students or staff.

The Ontario experience

Ontario set three goals for its public education system: better student outcomes, less inequity in outcomes, and increased public confidence in public education. Two achievement targets were also set: 75 per cent of students performing at a high level in literacy and numeracy in elementary schools, and 85 per cent of students graduating from high school in a timely way. The former is measured through annual testing of students in grades 3 and 6; the latter through graduation data reported by schools and districts. Although Ontario has focused on literacy and numeracy, it has also broadened the curriculum overall and given additional emphasis to physical activity and the arts.

A positive stance on improving all schools and success for all students

Some government efforts to improve education have started with negative messages: schools are not doing well and only strong action can change the situation; worse, educators cannot be trusted to do their jobs. Imposed solutions based on criticism of the system are motivated by a variety of factors. It may be good politics to talk tough about schools. It may be that people can see no other way to drive change in large and complex systems. Directed reform may be seen as the only way to ensure that, in any reasonable period of time, children get a better education.

Whatever the motivation, imposed solutions do not work. If we have learned anything over recent decades about large-scale improvement in education, it is that reforms 'done to the system' do not have the desired effects. The evidence, not just from education, but also more generally, is that reform strategies must be explained and implemented in ways that engage the idealism and professional commitments of (in this case) educators (Fullan, 2006).

Real improvement is only possible if people are motivated, individually and collectively, to put in the effort needed to get results. Changed practice across many, many schools will only happen when teachers, principals, and support staff see the need and commit themselves to make the effort to improve their practice, and when students and parents see that the desired changes will be good for them too. Planners of reform must keep in mind the importance of engaging educators in all aspects of the reform if serious improvement is wanted.

Calling for a positive and motivating stance does not preclude all criticism. Indeed, the call for improvement necessarily reflects a belief that performance can be improved. But there is a big difference between attacking a system as failing and calling for improvement in a system that is regarded as reasonably successful. The former is demotivating for almost everyone involved, while the latter simply recognizes that every organization has its shortcomings. Honesty will often motivate good people; they can buy into the idea that 'we are good but we need to get even better'.

Improving motivation is a long-term challenge. Almost every eventual success gets off to a bumpy start. But if a reform strategy does not over time improve motivation, it will fail. Building morale and motivation has many facets. Appealing to educators' sense of moral purpose – their belief that education is about success for all students – is important but not sufficient. Large-scale reform must also pay attention to other aspects of motivation such as capacity,

resources, peer and leadership support, identity, and so on. It is the combination that makes the difference. The other elements described in this booklet, if done well, will also improve motivation. But the point to keep in mind is that any strategy that starts with attacks on the existing system is highly unlikely to produce lasting, positive results, just as teachers cannot motivate students to succeed by focusing on their inadequacies and exhorting them to work harder.

A positive stance also implies that all schools are involved in improvement. In many settings the focus is principally or even exclusively on so-called low-performing schools. But such a focus is wrong for two reasons.

First, it segregates schools unfairly and creates division across the system. It is much better to have every school involved in improvement, no matter what its starting point, so that the responsibility is broadly shared. In any case, when their starting point is taken into account, some lower-performing schools may actually be outperforming other schools. Second, and just as importantly, system improvement goals cannot be met only in low-performing schools because most lower-performing students are not in those schools. Schools that have decent overall performance often have considerable numbers of students who are not doing so well, which means that many of the students who need attention are not found in the schools at the bottom of the performance tables. So for both these reasons, it is important to involve all schools in reform efforts.

Improvement must also address achievement gaps and inequities. In all systems, some groups of students do better than others for reasons that have nothing to do with their ability. Specific efforts to reduce these gaps, whether focused on gender, ethnicity, language or other factors, must be part of any overall improvement strategy (Glaze, Mattingly, and Levin, 2012).

The Ontario experience

The government spoke positively and publicly about the contributions of all partners, from teachers to students and parents. It took the view that educational performance was already good, but could and should be even better. All schools and districts were involved in the improvement effort but there were no sanctions for low-performing schools. Many steps were taken (these are described later) to engage the partners in the improvement process, and almost all the steps taken were borrowed from actions already in place in schools in the province.

Capacity building

While every successful strategy has multiple elements, the single most important is ‘capacity building with a focus on results’. Some 25 years ago Fullan (1985) stated that both ‘pressure and support’ are required for large-scale reform. This was on the right track but not precise enough. For one thing, many policy-makers overdid the pressure, with the negative impacts on motivation already noted. For another, identifying what was wrong did not tell anyone what to do about it. Even when support was provided, it was usually not sufficient or specific enough to have an impact. The phrase, ‘capacity building with a focus on results’, captures both aspects well. The focus is on improved results but the ‘capacity to get there’ is the driving priority.

Capacity building involves increasing collective effectiveness in terms of improving outcomes and reducing inequities. This means developing individual and collective: (a) knowledge and competencies, (b) resources, and (c) motivation. These capacities are specifically about getting results for students. Better performance can only happen when people develop new capacities. At the same time, new capacities build motivation because they generate clarity, skills, and success. Capacity building is for all leaders and staff in the system, from elected leaders to teachers and support staff.

Most change efforts are weak on capacity building, which is one of the main reasons why they fall short. Instead of focusing on capacity building they focus on changes in policy and assume that, by some magical means, new policies will lead to new practices. Many years of research in education and other fields show that this does not happen; policy changes alone cannot create improvement.

A key part of the focus on results is positive pressure. An emphasis on accountability by itself produces negative pressure that is demotivating and does nothing to improve capacity. By contrast, positive pressure is motivating, palpably fair and reasonable, and accompanied by resources for capacity building. The more one invests in capacity building, the more one has the right to expect greater performance. The more one focuses fairly on results – comparing similar schools, using data over multiple years, providing targeted support for improvement – the more motivational leverage can be used.

Capacity building is not about one-way transmission of knowledge. Improvement requires many opportunities for ‘learning in context’. In fact, creating systems where learning in context is endemic is the point. Elmore has pinpointed the issue: ‘Improvement is more a function of learning to do

the right things in the setting where you work' (2004: 73). However teachers in many systems have few opportunities to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the settings where they actually work. Nor do they get effective input on good practice (Timperley *et al.*, 2007).

Elmore then puts forward the positive implication:

The theory of action behind [this process of examining practice] might be stated as follows: The development of systematic knowledge about, and related to, large-scale instructional improvement requires a change in the prevailing culture of administration and teaching in schools. Cultures do not change by mandate; they change by the specific displacement of existing norms, structures, and processes by others; the process of cultural change depends fundamentally on modeling the new values and behavior that you expect to displace the existing ones (2004: 11).

In this way, learning in context actually improves the context itself (Spillane, 2006), not only in schools but also in the larger system. Capacity building is a collective process. It requires many people in a school to collaborate to make a contextual change. Sustainable improvement relies on 'lateral capacity building' in which schools and districts learn from each other. When this happens, two change forces are unleashed: knowledge (best ideas flow) and motivation (people identify with larger parts of the system). For example, when principals interact across schools and even districts in this way, they become concerned about the success of the other schools in the network almost as much as about their own. This is an example of changing for the better the larger context within which they work.

Capacity building is not an end in itself. It needs to be linked explicitly to results. For example, professional learning communities can be an important part of an improvement strategy but they are not the strategy itself; they are a means not an end. In many settings, creating the learning systems becomes the goal, but in fact these structures only have value if they lead to changes in students' experience and learning.

The Ontario experience

Capacity building was a major focus of the Ontario approach, with very extensive efforts to support improved teaching practice, not only through additional professional development but through the use of coaches, evaluation frameworks, planning processes, and the provision of materials and learning resources in print and online. Many networks were created within and across districts. Partner organizations such as teacher and principal organizations were also deeply engaged in this collective learning. This effort was strongly connected to the implementation infrastructure discussed later.

Multi-level engagement and strong leadership

Real reform requires sustained attention from many people at all levels of the education system. It is not enough for a state or national government to be fully committed, difficult as this is in itself. Many if not most schools and, where they exist, districts or regional authorities, must also share the goals and purposes of reform and improvement. It is even better when the efforts of the school system are understood and supported by external groups such as community agencies, since this is important for the political legitimacy of the education system. There can be – indeed, there should be – room for a variety of strategies to achieve the goals, but there cannot be substantial dissent on the main purposes themselves. For this objective to be met, change strategies should promote mutual interaction and influence within and across all levels of the system (Fullan, 2005, 2007). Although building system-wide support is difficult and arduous, it is necessary.

Barber (2007) has articulated the idea of the ‘guiding coalition’ around reform – the idea that key leaders at different levels, both politicians and administrators, all understand and articulate the strategy in very similar ways, so that leadership at all levels is mutually reinforcing. As will be discussed a little later, building this kind of common understanding requires extensive and effective two-way communication.

Strong leadership does not just emerge; it must be developed and cultivated. Leadership recruitment and development must be a key part of any successful improvement strategy. Nor should leadership be confined to those in official positions. For example, reform programmes should pay careful attention to building teacher leadership at the school level and to supporting effective leadership in stakeholder organizations such as teacher and other unions and parent groups, since these partners are also vital for sustainable change. Where local authorities exist, their leadership and its development, both political and managerial, is also essential to prevent bickering and finger-pointing that is not only distracting but hurts public confidence and support. However, leadership development is not an end in itself; it is only a means by which goals can be achieved.

Shared vision and ownership are the outcomes of, rather than preconditions for, a quality process; they have to be created. Behaviour often changes before beliefs. So everything must be biased towards action and learning rather than, as is traditional, endless planning before acting. Some planning is

certainly necessary, but the size and prettiness of the planning document is inversely related to the amount and quality of action, and in turn to the impact on student learning (Reeves, 2006). Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) also emphasize this theme when they talk about the dangers of using planning as a substitute for action. The goal of leadership is to build the engagement, partnership, and skills necessary for sustainable reform.

Reformers often have a tendency to think that the validity of their approach is self-evident to every reasonable person. But there will always be different points of view, different priorities, and different understandings in a public system. People will inevitably misunderstand or misinterpret what is happening, either from lack of understanding or for their own purposes. The nature of human interaction requires constant efforts to communicate, and never more so than when some significant change is being attempted. In countries that have deep internal divides among various groups or regions this work is more difficult; it is also more important. If significant groups feel left out of the process it will not be effective or sustainable.

Effective communication is not spin or propaganda. It is not intended to convince people of something (which in any case is increasingly difficult, given our multi-channel world and better educated and more sceptical populations). Rather, effective communication means frequent, honest, two-way communication about what is being attempted, and its challenges and setbacks as well as its successes. This, too, takes real effort.

Communication has to address the public. Educators often forget that most voters do not have children at school, or direct links to schools, and tend to get their information from other people or the media. This is why it is so important to have public targets and progress reporting. For reasons of credibility, it may be advisable in some situations to have third party reporting. Part of the challenge, discussed earlier, of ensuring that a few key targets do not distort the entire system is to have multiple forms of reporting and to provide information on many outcomes, not just those that have been chosen as the key deliverables. Having multiple forms of reporting and providing information on many outcomes can help ensure that a few key targets do not distort the entire system.

Internal communication is also vital. It is amazing how many organizations put a plan in place and neglect to tell their employees what it is, or to solicit staff input. Many teachers are unaware of their district's or state's priorities and strategies. Communication to support staff, parents, and

students is equally important. Students in particular are an often-neglected source of potential support for meaningful improvement in teaching and learning practices (Fullan, 2007; Levin and Pekar, 2007).

Any communications professional will confirm that the three secrets of effective communication are repetition, repetition, and repetition. Governments are often criticized for spending money on communications, yet good communication, as described here, is an essential part of any programme of school improvement.

However, good communication is not unidirectional; real improvement requires regular quality feedback from the system, feedback that is taken seriously and used to adapt and improve change strategies. It is important to balance commitment to a course of action with willingness to change based on feedback about results.

A final point on communications is the importance of dialogue with employee unions. Reformers are sometimes impatient with teacher unions, seeing them as barriers to change. Yet teacher unions are important not only for their ability to block reforms – which they have certainly been able to do in many instances – but also for their potential role as supporters of good practice. A first requirement for effective education is to have high-quality teachers. This is most likely to happen when teachers have reasonable wages and working conditions – and this is most likely to happen when there are unions to bargain for them. Reformers who care about students should be encouraging teacher unions to work together on professional and public confidence issues, not attacking them as impediments to improvement.

The Ontario experience

Having experienced years of conflict prior to 2004, the Ontario government set out to build trust and partnership in various ways, including by the creation of a formal 'Partnership Table' chaired by the Minister of Education, where all partners could contribute views on the overall strategy and its components. Considerable time and energy were invested in working with all partners to build their support for the overall agenda, with considerable success. Partners were also funded to lead some parts of the larger agenda. Attention was given to communicating with the public, and with students and parents, not only informing them of changes but seeking their input into proposals and programmes.

Continuous learning through innovation and effective use of research and data

An effective system has organized processes by which it learns about its own performance and adapts accordingly. Out of these processes comes disciplined innovation. Disciplined innovation starts with knowledge and builds on what is learned. Altogether different from the endless succession of pilot projects for which there is little supporting evidence and no follow-up that has been characteristic of many education systems, disciplined innovation involves experimenting in thoughtful ways and studying the outcomes, thereby increasing what is known about effective policy and practice (Levin, 2012*b*).

A growing body of quality research in education provides evidence that can be used to guide policy and reform. For example, we now know that early reading instruction should include specific teaching of phonemic and other skills as well as immersion in a rich and stimulating environment of literacy tasks and resources (Pressley, 2005). We know that we can reduce high school dropout rates if students feel that there is at least one adult in the school who genuinely knows and cares about them (Levin, 2012*a*). We know that retention in a grade is useless, if not harmful, to a student's future progress (Jimerson, 2009). And so on Excellent summaries of our growing knowledge about effective practice can be found in Hattie (2008) and Marzano (2003).

Although knowledge about effective education is increasing, practice lags well behind. For example, social promotion continues to be widely advocated and practised despite abundant evidence that it does not work; assessment continues to be used to punish students for their attitudes or behaviours; and the list goes on We should not be too discouraged, however, by this gap between knowledge and practice; it can take many years to translate what research has unequivocally demonstrated to be effective into common practice. Also, there are still many areas in which knowledge is limited and unable to effectively guide practice.

There is actually no excuse for any jurisdiction to put forward an improvement plan that does not use the available evidence as the basis for policy and continued learning, but an often-heard excuse is that there is no system for finding, sharing, and using evidence in practice. Few school systems invest significantly in making research widely available or in helping educators interpret and apply research, yet the same systems expect educators to do so. Like any other profession, education should embrace research evidence as a prime determinant of effective practice.

Another important element is the effective use of student achievement data. While many systems have such data, few do the careful analysis that would actually inform practice. The focus typically remains on ranking or rating schools instead of on which curriculum areas might need attention or how student learning might be improved. Whatever the domain, a results-oriented strategy enables and requires all levels of the system to use ongoing data for improvement as well as for accountability.

In terms of accountability, schools, districts, and governments should focus on: (a) how well they are progressing (using their own starting points as the basis for comparison); (b) how well they are doing compared with similar schools, districts or governments (comparing apples with apples); and (c) how well they are doing relative to an absolute standard (e.g. 100 per cent success). Even more importantly, they should focus on what the data can tell them about how they can help more students to be more successful.

The Ontario experience

Ontario built a sophisticated student information system, though the potential of that system to inform practice is only now being fully developed. Ontario also developed an education research and evaluation strategy that drew researchers and schools into extensive dialogue on how to get the most benefit and value from education research (Campbell and Fulford, 2009). Most importantly, innovations in policy and practice were rooted in research and then evaluated and modified as more was learned about them.

A focus on key strategies while also managing other interests and issues

Effective leaders know that it is essential to have a small number of key goals. No organization can do 50 things well at the same time. There is a saying in the business literature that 'having more than two objectives is like having no objectives at all'. Yet experience shows that maintaining focus over time is perhaps the single hardest thing to do when managing change at any level, whether in a single school or a national system. When leaders try to focus their school or system on a few key goals (such as improving early literacy or engaging parents more effectively), something surprising seems to happen: all kinds of other pressures surface to occupy the time and energy that was meant to be focused on those goals.

This happens even when most of the people in the organization have agreed on the priorities. The careful winning of staff and stakeholder agreement on priorities is important but no guarantee that, the very next day, the same people will not turn around and demand action on a whole list of other issues.

The challenge is even greater in the public sector, where there can be abrupt changes in leadership (as a result of elections) or, even more commonly, abrupt changes in what is in the public focus (due to events or media attention) (Levin, 2005). When public attention shifts, so does the attention of government leaders. It is extraordinarily difficult to maintain focus on the same set of priorities for three to four years, yet this is exactly what is required for sustained change to take place.

As a result, education leaders at all levels continually lament that their situations simply do not permit them to do the things they know are important. Principals find they do not have time to visit classrooms or talk with teachers. Superintendents have the same problem when trying to visit schools or reach out to the community. Elected political leaders, even when they have stood on a platform of clear priorities, find that the pressures on them do not relate to those priorities and that they are constantly distracted by other matters.

Inevitably, focus suffers. The important is sidelined by the urgent; the squeaky wheel gets the grease even if it is not the wheel that moves the bus. Priorities do not get the attention they deserve and other really important ancillary functions get short-changed. A good example is communications, both internal and external, as discussed above.

Managing change involves accepting the realities of opposition and distraction. Although it is tempting to treat

these as nuisances, or at best problems, no amount of arguing or convincing will make them go away. Any plan that assumes plain sailing and no disruptions is going to run into serious problems. Plenty of examples from the history of education reform demonstrate this.

In a complex public institution such as education there are always competing interests at work. Each stakeholder group has its own favourite causes and its own interests, and will continue to advance these no matter what the official priorities may be. Many forces at work in the system favour the status quo by diverting energy from improvement to maintenance. These include collective bargaining issues, administrative procedures, and short-term political imperatives. Such pressures cannot be ignored but, equally, they cannot be allowed to compromise the central focus. In fact, explicit attention must be paid to managing the inevitable distractions so that they do not displace the central goals. Minimizing the impact of distractors is all the more difficult because people are often quite happy to abandon long-term objectives to deal with an urgent, short-term issue such as a media crisis.

So when managing education reform the challenge is how to pay sufficient attention to all the competing agendas and interests without losing sight of, or ceasing to focus on, the key priorities for improvement. This is indeed a fine art. It requires strong partnerships between political leaders and senior officials, as well as strong political leadership. It requires key organizations and leaders to ensure that other issues are managed effectively but without usurping the time and attention needed for the core strategies. This means ensuring that some key change leaders are protected from distractions that arise and able to keep much, if not all, of their attention on the core business. It means ensuring that superintendents and principals are not told to be change leaders and then distracted by demands to do lots of other things first. It means sharing leadership at all levels so that more people are focused on the main task.

Another related challenge is to create coherence and alignment across the system so that one part of the organization is not inadvertently undermining the overall strategy because it has different concerns or priorities. Very few large organizations, and very few ministries, achieve this level of coherence. For example, finance or human resource systems can generate huge amounts of work, which, while important, distracts leaders from educational priorities. To build understanding of, and support for, the central agenda, leaders must pay continuous attention to public communication: the crucial thing is to stay the course without deviating from the few key priorities.

Managing also requires being proactive and anticipating problems that might arise. Leaders who are well attuned

to their organizations and communities can often foresee what many of these problems will be; they can and should then manage them ahead of time so that they do not blow up. As discussed earlier, dialogue and communication is an early-warning system for problems. Some action can be taken to demonstrate an understanding that there are issues important to other people that deserve attention. Often a relatively small step now will head off a much bigger problem later.

The Ontario experience

Constant reiteration of the core goals and strategies was an important factor in maintaining focus. Another was that the Ministry reduced its activity and requirements in non-priority areas and put in place feedback systems so that districts and schools could tell it when their attention was being distracted. Timelines and reporting requirements relating to non-core matters were reduced. Many high-profile events were held to keep people's attention focused on the main goals.

Effective use of resources

Efforts to create change are often equated with the investment of additional funds. It is true that some additional resourcing is often required to support improvement, but once a reasonable level of investment is reached, additional money is not the critical driver. New resources have to be used appropriately, and it is just as important to pursue more effective use of existing resources (Grubb, 2009). Of course, the current level of funding is a factor; in countries that are unable to pay decent salaries to sufficient teachers, it is a critical factor. But even in these situations, how money is used is often as important as how much is provided.

New money can be important in three ways. First, for people within the system, it serves as a tangible sign of commitment to change, and it is a critical element in building motivation for improvement. Second, it can be important in managing distractors. Collective bargaining and teachers' salaries must be handled effectively to ensure that good people continue to enter and stay in the profession, and to prevent wage and benefit issues becoming major distractions. Third, modest additional financial resources can be used to lever significant change by supporting new ways of working. For example, better professional development, leadership development, or in-school coaching of teaching practice can all be supported with very modest increases in funding.

As mentioned, however, it is equally important to ensure that existing resources are well used. Growing evidence points to more and less effective uses of resources in terms of staffing, professional development, paraprofessional assistance and class sizes, and in other areas. Many educational organizations do not pay sufficient attention to the way they allocate resources and match them to priorities (Levin and Naylor, 2007; Grubb, 2009). For example, the allocation of support staff is often linked not to teaching and learning but to special education procedures. Other examples of poor resource use include high teacher turnover (which is costly in multiple ways), moving administrators frequently from school to school (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006), or failing to ensure that high-needs schools receive their fair share of the most skilled teachers.

Improvement of governance and leadership should be directed in part to helping leaders make more informed decisions about how to allocate staff and other resources, given our knowledge about effective strategies to improve learning. Most education leaders lack knowledge of basic economic concepts such as marginal cost and utility or opportunity cost, so they are unable to make good decisions

about resource use. A further issue is that, in many systems, control of resources is overly centralized, making it very difficult for school leaders, even when well informed, to make decisions they recognize as necessary. System leaders also need to develop understanding not only of economic resources but of vehicles such as ‘smart tools’ (Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd, 2009).

The Ontario experience

Although Ontario did put significant new resourcing into schools as part of its improvement agenda, it was able to lever substantial change from relatively small amounts of funding by carefully organizing strategies and focusing on high-yield actions. Additionally, steps were taken to remove some of the main pressures on funding. These included changing special education rules and giving local leaders more discretion over spending provided they had a good improvement strategy in place.

A strong implementation effort

A good plan is nothing without effective implementation. However, the realities of political and organizational life are such that implementation tends to get short shrift in comparison to the time and effort spent developing and announcing a policy or programme. Usually there are so many pressures on decision-makers that they do not have the time, even if they have the inclination, to follow through carefully on the steps needed for effective implementation.

Implementation should not be interpreted as strict adherence to a predetermined policy; instead, it should be understood as the effort to achieve the intended purpose. It will inevitably involve adaptations to suit local conditions and circumstances. Mindless adoption of prescribed behaviours, whether by educators or students, is antithetical to education under any circumstance. But accepting this interpretation of implementation does not reduce the challenge; indeed, requiring implementation to be evidence-informed increases it.

One condition for effective implementation is appropriate authority at all levels of the system. While there are many different ways in which a system can be organized, if a system is too hierarchical or depends too much on direction from the top, the full contribution of all parties will not be achieved. To be effective parties to the improvement process, individual schools and groups of schools must be given sufficient authority.

The list of difficulties that can beset implementation is long. Fullan (2007) considers barriers to change in terms of the characteristics of the change itself, the setting for the implementation, and the wider context.

The characteristics of the change itself include clarity, complexity, and degree of difficulty. The setting addresses the school as an organization and includes aspects such as the commitment of key players (for example, the principal), the skills of those involved, the resources allocated, and the extent to which the change fits the current school culture and structure. The wider context includes the various other factors that will either support or inhibit implementation; for example, the nature of the support system, competing demands, or community support for change.

In reality, if a change is to have real and lasting impact, all of these elements have to be addressed. Implementation cannot

be assumed or left to chance; it must be carefully nurtured. Announcements followed by documents and a few training sessions will not change what happens in a large, complex system.

Two aspects of implementation require particular attention. The first is the infrastructure to support system-wide implementation. The second is the ability of a ministry of education to lead and support the work. Typically, neither of these aspects is taken seriously enough.

System infrastructure

There has to be a real plan for implementation, a plan that is seen to have the potential to create and support change across an entire system. This means ensuring that appropriate infrastructure is in place at all levels of the system. To change teaching and learning practices in large numbers of classrooms in ways that make sense to all involved, a lot of learning and a lot of change are required. Even when they want to, people do not easily change their habits.

The necessary improvements to infrastructure are rarely made. Instead, reliance is placed on policies, accountability measures, and small amounts of professional development, all of which are insufficient. Any improvement strategy requires thought about the kinds of structures that may be needed to support it. Often the existing bureaucratic structures are insufficient to implement and support real improvement because they are focused on ongoing maintenance or policy, or they lack the required skills so new capacity has to be created.

The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in England was the first major strategy to recognize the need for real effort in implementation. To support the desired changes, regional teams and hundreds of teacher consultant positions were created. Large amounts of data, resources, professional development, and extra money were made available. While these efforts were unprecedented in scale and made a big difference to the impact of the strategies, they were still fairly small relative to the system they were trying to change (Barber, 2007; Earl *et al.*, 2003). As yet, we do not know how much support infrastructure is 'enough', but it helps to keep in mind that we are trying to quantify the effort it takes to change the practice of the thousands of people who daily work within the system.

An effective change infrastructure also depends on active cooperation from leaders across the system – from teacher

leaders and principals to district leaders, whether appointed or elected – and on the kinds of systems already mentioned that engage and link people to create synergy and a sense of common purpose. Both have a huge multiplier effect on capacity to implement change.

The Ontario experience

Ontario created leadership and support systems for elementary school literacy and numeracy, and for high school graduation. About 100 people worked directly for the Ministry in each area of focus, but their work was supplemented through effective partnerships with leaders in all 72 school districts and by the creation of teams in every school to lead implementation. This effort, plus associated costs, amounted to about 1 per cent of the annual budget for elementary and secondary education.

Ministry capacity

Although ministries of education typically have the lead responsibility for implementing education reforms and improvements, only rarely do they have the capacity to do this work effectively. Typically, they are organized and staffed to make and enforce policies, distribute funds, and solve administrative or political problems. They have few people who understand school improvement, few systems to support it, and few procedures that focus on it. Their senior management teams are not necessarily used to working collaboratively.

To support real change, education ministries need a good level of internal coherence. Though typical, it is not acceptable for different units to work with schools independently, making different, uncoordinated demands; senior ministry leaders must work to create and then enforce a sense of common purpose that will allow the system as a whole to focus on what is truly important. Only then will an improvement programme have a chance of success.

The appendix to this booklet lists the characteristics of an effective ministry. Few ministries will be able to give themselves a tick on all characteristics, but if they are lacking on a substantial number, they are not in a good position to support real improvement.

Conclusion and future prospects



Although use of change knowledge is increasing internationally, prospects remain mixed. There are three main reasons for this. First, the use of change knowledge does not promise the quick fix or satisfying of an ideological agenda that political pressures often demand. Governments are almost always under more pressure to ‘do something’ than to demonstrate that recent policies have been successful. Second, this more complex approach to reform is difficult to grasp, and if the desired change is to become widespread and the strategies consistently applied, the approach must be understood and embraced by many leaders simultaneously (‘the guiding coalition’). Given leadership turnover and the many competing pressures faced by governments and school systems, this is a tall order. Third, lasting improvement does require deep cultural change of schools, which many people resist, tacitly or otherwise. It requires patient, hard, unrelenting effort over a period of years.

On the positive side, there are factors working in favour of the increased use of change knowledge. First, after years of trying everything else, the results have not been encouraging. Increasing numbers of policy-makers and the public now realize that much of what has been tried has not worked. This makes them more receptive to promising alternative strategies. Second, change knowledge and its strategic implications are becoming clearer, thanks in part to an extensive international network of researchers. Ideas around capacity building are becoming mainstream, and the more jurisdictions experiment with capacity building approaches, the more we learn about how to make them work. While not a quick fix, we now know that this kind of approach can produce significant results within one election period: in the case of Ontario, three to four years.

The next phase of large-scale education improvement will have greater emphasis on strategies that affect all classrooms and on elements that foster ongoing quality and equity or are essential for societal reform. Reforms primarily focused on structure and governance should be less dominant. Countries will pay more explicit policy attention to the quality of the teaching force (OECD, 2011), principals, and other leaders, while recognizing the importance of increased professional motivation for educators derived from public respect and positive pressure. Other elements in a more comprehensive approach to ‘capacity building with a focus on results’ will include greater attention to early childhood (from conception to age 5), well-being of students of all ages, and adult education, particularly as a complement to the development of young children.

Many countries have done an impressive job of providing a solid education and improving the life chances of 50 to 60 per cent of the population. But current strategies are typically not going to achieve this for 80 or 90 per cent or more of the population. Increased success requires a different strategy, one that tackles success for all students, through changes in practice in all schools, supported by the necessary policy changes.

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Appendix: Characteristics of effective ministries of education

The following is a checklist of the characteristics one would want to find in a department or ministry of education that was trying to support improved student outcomes across large numbers of schools. Most of these characteristics should be assessed on a continuum from weak to strong.*

Goals

1. A small number of clear goals, broadly communicated, that will remain in place for several years.
2. Clear commitment to the goals from top political leaders with a strong mandate to, and partnership with, senior civil servants.
3. Most organizational attention, rewards, resources, and routines are centred on achieving these goals.
4. Senior leaders and units are assigned clear responsibility and necessary authority and resources to achieve those goals.
5. There is an integrated focus across the organization on achieving the goals, including efforts to reduce competing priorities and distractions.

Senior management

6. Senior managers work as a team in which all of them understand and are committed to the key priorities, and everyone understands his or her role in them.
7. At the least, absence of sustained interpersonal and inter-unit conflict; at best, active support among senior leaders for each other and a strong sense of mutual respect and support.
8. The senior team is mostly comprised of operational leaders as opposed to central roles (e.g. finance, HR), so that goal achievement can be the dominant focus.

* Please acknowledge the author when quoting from this checklist.

Structure

9. Designated units with clear responsibility lead key priority areas while the rest of the organization supports these.
10. Reorganization takes place only when absolutely necessary; the first effort is always to work with existing structures.

Culture

11. There is open sharing of information, plans, priorities, and activities across the organization.
12. There are ongoing opportunities for all staff to understand the strategies and to be involved in examining progress on goals and next steps.
13. There is active collaboration across organizational boundaries within the ministry.
14. Achieving goals and priorities is more important than meeting administrative requirements.
15. The necessity of risk-taking and the reality that some things will not work as planned is understood and supported by leaders; there is a focus on learning and improving rather than avoiding mistakes.
16. The CEO models these practices and values.

Resources

17. The organization has good (timely, reliable, valid) information on the current state of the system, and on progress.
18. The budget allocates significant resources to main priorities.

Plans

19. There is a brief and clear public document that declares priorities and strategies and is regularly reviewed/updated.
20. The organization has active strategies for seeking and spreading effective practices across the education sector.

Stakeholders

21. Positive relationships with stakeholders are seen as an important adjunct to goal achievement.
22. Regular, open communication occurs with all major stakeholders, both individually and collectively.
23. Stakeholder views are taken seriously.

Staffing

24. The organization has a critical mass of credible, experienced educators with recent system experience, including but not limited to its senior leadership.
25. The organization has a good mix of experienced and new people.

Research

26. The organization supports, searches for, and shares best available evidence related to its activities and priorities.



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



International Institute
for Educational Planning

The International Institute for Educational Planning

The UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), created in 1963, supports governments in planning and managing their education systems so that they can achieve their national objectives as well as the internationally agreed development goals. IIEP develops sustainable educational capacity through:

- training of professionals in educational planning and management, through a wide range of modalities (ranging from long-term training to short-term intensive courses; face-to-face, blended, and distance training; and tailored onsite training);
- evidence-based research, allowing the anticipation of innovative solutions and emerging trends in the development of education systems;
- technical assistance to ministries of education and institutions, which enables countries to make the most of their own expertise, and minimize reliance on external organizations;
- sharing knowledge with all actors in the education community, including its wide range of resources (1,500 books, manuals, policy briefs, and thematic portals on education issues).

Belonging to the UN System, IIEP works at international, regional, and local levels with renowned public and private organizations, and actively participates in several networks to achieve successfully its mandate and its missions.