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## Introduction

**E**arly in 2007 I attended a number of major events looking at different aspects of Ontario's education agenda. I spoke with many system leaders, from teachers, principals, superintendents, and board members to parent leaders. Although these people did not agree on everything, they were agreed on one vital point. Education in Ontario, they said, was an exciting, energizing, and satisfying place to be. Many of them said that they felt the current period was the best time of their entire careers, as student achievement rose at the same time that educator engagement and morale were increasing.

This book is about how to create change of that kind and at that level. Communities around the world, from neighborhoods to countries, are looking for ways to strengthen their education systems. The rationales are familiar—the need for a competitive edge in the global economy, the changing skill requirements of a high-technology world, the demand for more informed and committed citizens to cope with the unprecedented problems of environmental degradation, and population diversity. Many towns, states, or countries now aspire, however unreasonably, to have “the best education system in the world.” Public expectations for our schools have never been higher.

High public expectations are both necessary and challenging. As educators we cannot rest on our laurels, and we cannot be satisfied with our previous achievements, no matter how good they are. Public schools everywhere have much to be proud of. Public education is an important achievement in human history. It has benefited millions who, in earlier periods, never had a chance to be educated. It has made important contributions to social development. Public education has served us well, in large part because so many educators have worked so hard on behalf of

their students. All that is wonderful, and should be celebrated, but it does not earn educators any free pass into the future. Education, like every other public institution, must find new ways to cope with the new challenges and new contexts that are an essential part of the human condition. The world changes, and so must schools.

The central challenge for public education in the coming years, at every level from school to nation, is to maintain and strengthen public confidence and support for public education so that people will want to send their children and provide their tax money. To succeed in this task, we will have to bring more students than ever before to higher levels of achievement and engagement in learning than ever before. We will have to deal with more diverse needs and interests in our schools than ever before. We will have to communicate more effectively with our communities than ever before. These challenges will, in turn, require high-caliber people and effective leadership at all levels of education to support and bring about the required changes.

Lasting and sustainable improvement means improving student outcomes across a broad range of important areas (not just reading and math, and not just as measured by test scores). It means reducing the gaps in outcomes among different population groups. And it means doing so in ways that support positive morale among educators, students, and parents; that do not demand impossible levels of energy on an ongoing basis; that increase the capacity of the school or system to continue to be successful; and that generate increased public confidence.

Improving schools is hard work. We have plenty of experience with efforts that have either failed to create improvement or failed to last, as discussed more fully in chapter 2. The outcomes of education are shaped to a large degree by factors that schools do not control, particularly poverty and its related ills. Schools, like other large institutions, tend toward the status quo. They are also very busy places, where people by and large are feeling fully occupied and not looking for yet more challenges. Creating real, lasting improvement requires a sound theory of education, which research increasingly provides us. It also requires

a sound approach to management, including the ability to manage all the pressures and factors likely to get in the way of change and a commitment to communication with internal and external audiences. Vision is important, but so is the much less glorious work of looking after all the details that make things work.

This multifaceted approach is what I try to describe in this book, which is about leading large-scale, positive, sustainable change in education at all levels. It is intended to be a practical view of what can and should be done, informed by research and shaped by the author's personal experience both in leading change and in analyzing the change efforts of others. It is also intended to be optimistic, holding out a way to make progress while acknowledging the very real barriers and constraints. Leaders, I believe, need to be optimistic and realistic at the same time, as illustrated by the story that concludes this introduction.

Still, a reader might wonder why we need another book on educational change. After all, this is a subject that already has a large and rich literature, including extensive case studies of particular changes and more general discussions of change.

My answer to that perfectly reasonable question is that there are important things still to be said about leading and managing change in education. Indeed, as we have had more experience with large-scale change and learned more about it, new and deeper questions have emerged. One reason why there is so much writing on this subject, including now four editions of Michael Fullan's classic *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, is because new learning and changing circumstances pose new challenges and require us to reflect, think, and—most of all—act in new ways.

I have been fortunate to be able to consider educational change from several perspectives—as an academic studying education policy, as a consultant working with school systems in several parts of the world, and especially as a senior official playing an important part in the renewal of public education in two Canadian provinces. I have had the benefit of reading and learning from the work of others and of participating actively in a number of important change efforts. Based on

these experiences, I have become aware of a number of gaps or oversights in the literature, and also usually in practice, which are the major themes in this book.

First, although we have learned quite a bit about change in schools, we know much less about how to create real change at a broader level, across many schools or entire systems, and how to do so in a sustainable way, so that today's changes do not become tomorrow's memories. As Hargreaves and Fink put it, "Sustainability does not simply mean whether something can last. It addresses how particular initiatives can be developed without compromising the development of others in the surrounding environment, now and in the future" (Hargreaves & Fink 2000: 32).

We do know that what works in one school or a few schools will not necessarily work across hundreds or thousands of classrooms or across multiple districts, yet it is the many classrooms and schools that we need to affect, not just a few here and there.

Although in some ways improving one school is a very different task from improving an entire system, in other ways the basic ideas of improvement are the same at any scale. The issues and strategies described in this book apply at every level, from a classroom to a country. Creating real improvement is always challenging at any level, but there is an extra challenge in creating improvement that is both widespread and lasting.

The issue of scale also raises the need to organize change in a way that is manageable for ordinary people. So many accounts of change seem to depend on heroic efforts by seemingly superhuman people. Yet entire education systems cannot depend for their success on having large numbers of extraordinary people—who, by definition, are always in short supply. The standards developed for education leaders in various places, discussed further in the chapter on leadership, seem to call for super-people who can do everything at once at a very high level of proficiency. As a change strategy, this is akin to basing one's retirement income on winning the lottery. Best not count on it. We must therefore consider how to create and sustain change in ways that

work for reasonably competent and committed people, not just for superheroes.

Making change manageable also means taking account of the real, daily demands on educators and school leaders. In the world of books or standards documents, it's easy to recommend five steps or eight actions. In the real world of schools it all looks different. Education leaders at all levels face multiple demands and pressures. And even when there is agreement on what to do, how to do it may be far from obvious.

Much of the advice given to leaders in books like this one urges them to do something in particular—and sometimes a long list of things. It's all very well to call for principals to spend more time in classrooms, or to become leaders of professional learning communities, or for superintendents to engage much more in building community support. The question those folks rightly pose in response is, What are they supposed to stop doing? After all, they are not currently heading for home at 3:30 with their work all done! School leaders, along with most teachers, work hard for long hours. If we are going to ask them to change what they do, we have a responsibility to help them see how they can actually do that, given what they take to be the realities of their jobs.

In practice, leadership is always a matter of balancing competing demands, interests, ideas, and approaches. Yes, a common vision or sense of direction is important, but must it be pushed to the exclusion of all else? Yes, it's necessary to focus on teaching and learning, but the building still has to run as well. Yes, greater consistency in teaching strategies is desirable across grades and subjects, but should this be mandatory or voluntary? Yes, more parent involvement is a good idea, but what about the small number of parents who can eat up huge amounts of everyone's time and attention?

A considerable amount of writing on change lays out the things people need to do differently. It has less to say about *how* to do those things. One of the challenges in education, as in other policy fields, is that the pizzazz is around having the seemingly new idea, whereas the real work is in making it happen. While innovations tend to get the profile, the

slog work of implementation is what makes the difference in the end, and this work gets much less attention in the literature on education change. As many business analysts would agree, having a great new idea is less important to success than getting ordinary things done correctly and efficiently. Moreover, governments, schools, and systems tend to be much bigger on announcing new initiatives than they are on putting in place all the mechanisms necessary for those new announcements to turn into reality and become permanent features of the landscape.

The right answer to these challenges is rarely clear, and may change from time to time and place to place. Leaders, like teachers in classrooms, have to make constant judgments about what to do next, about when to push and when to let go, about how much direction to give against how much autonomy to allow, about diversity versus consistency. Every idea and every proposal in every book about leading change—including this one—has to be interpreted in the light of real situations with real people. My grandmother, when asked about how much flour or baking powder to put in a cake recipe, used to say “just enough.” The problem was that she knew from experience when it was “just enough” while I did not. It’s finding the “just enough” in each situation that challenges and perplexes all leaders, whether in education or other fields.

Politics are another important theme in this book. The literature on education change tends to ignore politics or treat it as an exogenous force, yet political factors have a huge impact on which changes get considered, adopted, supported, and maintained. Educators are not particularly political people by and large. They want to get on with the work of helping children learn and succeed. They often see politics getting in the way of their work, bringing unreasonable mandates or pressures on them. But the world of any public institution is inevitably political. For better or worse, and usually for some degree of each, politics is the way through which public decisions get made in democracies, and, as Winston Churchill famously said about democracy, “it is the worst system of government ever devised—except for all the others that have been tried from time to time.” We don’t have to like politics or accept its many weaknesses, but we do have to recognize that public

education is part of the political world. Educational leaders have to see dealing with political factors as a main responsibility in their work. In this book I try to explain some of the inevitable features of the political world, and how they can be managed.

Political pressures are one main reason that worthwhile changes in education do not last or, even worse, why wrong changes are made in the first place. There are, though, some positive signs about school improvement. While educators in the United States have been struggling with the requirements of No Child Left Behind, there has been around the world a positive shift in thinking about education policy. In the 1980s and much of the 1990s education reform was driven in many places by the idea that improvement could be created through changes in governance, or through increased testing and accountability, or by threats and punishments for failure. As discussed more fully in the chapter on barriers, over the last twenty years we have learned, often the hard way, that these approaches do not bring the desired results. Increasingly, governments and educational leaders are recognizing that the central element in any real improvement must be, as Michael Fullan puts it (2006), “capacity building with a focus on results [for students].” We are seeing more effort in more places to help the system get better instead of punishing it for its shortcomings.

This change in political thinking provides an enormous opportunity for educators to do the things we care about. The opportunity is particularly critical in the United States, where No Child Left Behind and other similar policies have at best distracted people from the requirements of real improvement, and at worst have done significant damage to public education. These policies and directions are now up for debate and possible change. The 2008 U.S. presidential election will be followed by a debate over where to go with education policy in the next few years. The requirement to reauthorize or change the existing approach marks an opportunity to move in a new and better direction. It should be possible to continue the focus on better outcomes for all children regardless of origin, while jettisoning the elements of fear and punishment that have had such negative effects on teachers and students over the last few years.

I contend in this book that there are ways to push forward system improvement, even in a large and decentralized place like the United States, that do not rely on simplistic ideas about accountability, that do not make everything dependent on a single test score, that help strengthen the skills and motivation of students and educators rather than demotivating them, and in doing those things also build public confidence in public education.

### **THEORY OF ACTION FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

“There is nothing so practical as a good theory” is a quote attributed to the organization theorist Kurt Lewin. Lewin meant that any practical effort to do something necessarily embodied, whether more or less thoughtfully, some theory about how things work and can be changed.

The same is true of school improvement. An effort to improve must rest on some notion, however inchoate, of how schools work and how improvement can be generated. The ideas in this book rest on the following theory of action:

- ◆ Although student outcomes are deeply affected by forces beyond the school, such as socioeconomic status, schools also play an important role in shaping what happens to students.
- ◆ We do not know the limits of human capacity to improve; all we know is that we have not reached those limits yet and that people continue to surprise us with their abilities to achieve and their resilience, sometimes in the face of enormous obstacles.
- ◆ The heart of school improvement rests in improving daily teaching and learning practices in schools, including engaging students and their families.
- ◆ Those improvements are a matter of “will”—people’s motivation—and of “skill”—their capacity.
- ◆ Improvement can therefore only occur and last where school staff are engaged and committed.

- ◆ Improvement in teaching and learning requires sustained effort and support, including the development of new skills and attitudes.
- ◆ Everything else in the school organization and operations must support these effective methods of teaching and learning.
- ◆ Lasting change in schools requires ongoing support from the public.
- ◆ Effective leadership at all levels, including political support, is critical to the whole improvement endeavor.
- ◆ Distractions are inevitable but have to be managed to minimize their negative impact.

This is the model that is developed in this book, with each of the above points, and many complementary issues, developed in the various chapters. An initial chapter describes my personal journey in relation to school improvement, and chapter 2 describes in some detail the very positive changes that took place in Ontario, Canada, in the last few years. The other chapters then roughly follow the theory of action here, starting with what we might reasonably expect from our schools (chapter 3), discussing the barriers to change (chapter 4), outlining needed changes in teaching and learning practices (chapter 5) and the organizational practices need to support those changes (chapter 6). Later chapters discuss the political challenge of building and sustaining public confidence (chapter 7), the leadership challenges to implementing the entire agenda (chapter 8), and the important task of leading in an environment full of operational and political distractions and pressures (chapter 9). My conclusion (chapter 10) recaps some of the main ideas and implications of the book.

The chapters can also be read separately, however, or in a different order. The reader may also find a certain amount of recycling of key ideas, much as in a spiral curriculum in schools, and for the same reason. Some of the central themes of the book—such as the vital role of positive motivation, the necessity to take political factors into account, or the importance of internal and external communications—recur at various points in the book because they take different forms related to

different aspects of the overall task, and because they are too important to mention once and then leave aside.

I know that it is possible to make real and lasting change that benefits students, and to do so on a large scale. In the early chapters I describe some of my own experiences and also efforts I have seen elsewhere, especially in Ontario in the last few years, that have produced significantly improved student outcomes while being well grounded in evidence, respectful of educators, and widely supported by the public. More examples are provided throughout the book. Even under the restrictive and in many ways negative conditions arising from policies such as No Child Left Behind, some schools and districts in the United States have seen not only marked improvement in results but a whole new positive attitude on the part of staff, students, and parents. Teacher morale can be improved at the same time as student results. If improvement can be made on a sustained basis in some places, then the same can be done in other schools, districts, states, and countries. It is not easy. It takes well-founded plans, careful implementation, political support, and most of all unrelenting effort, but it can be done and it is worth doing—indeed, it is our moral obligation to make every effort to help more students be more successful.

I hope this book will be useful and meaningful to education leaders at all levels, from teacher leaders in a school to the managers of state and national education systems. This may seem arrogant, but in fact the central tasks are the same. There is no magic in these pages. I simply try to assemble and describe what talented and dedicated educators and their allies everywhere have been doing.

### **COMBINING VISION, OPTIMISM, AND REALISM**

A central concept through this book is the need for balance. So much in education requires balancing competing pressures and demands, to which there is no right answer. How much pressure and how much support? How much local option and how much central direction? How much uniformity of approach versus diversity? How to balance

the long and short term? How to be impatient for better results yet understanding of why they are so hard to achieve?

The challenge of reconciling these different pressures was brought home to me by one of my nephews years ago. He was five at the time and had just come back from kindergarten. We were talking to my father, his grandfather, and Daniel announced that when the Messiah comes, lions won't eat lambs any more.

"Is that right, Daniel?" my father asked. "What do you think the lions will eat then?"

"Oh," Daniel replied, "deer, rabbits, whatever they can catch."

He understood the issue. The biblical vision was of peace and a world living in harmony. One had to be optimistic that the vision would be achieved. But one also had to be realistic; lions would not instantly turn into vegetarians. Getting lamb off the menu was, then, a good and reasonable first step.

This is exactly the world in which educators find themselves. We have a grand vision that we want to hold onto and work toward. But sometimes the steps toward it seem rather small. We have to be able to hold onto our vision, retain our optimism, and temper both with realism if we are to be able to continue to come to work each day believing in what we do.

I hope this book will help you do that.