

## **Systemic Reform for Sustainability**

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During the past number of decades provincial governments have engaged in numerous large-scales reforms. In Saskatchewan, two examples come to mind: *Directions* and *School<sup>PLUS</sup>*. The issue for provincially-based reform is to ensure that the reforms take hold and that the changes are sustained. Unfortunately, the literature on reform has not been too kind to educational systems. While some incremental improvements have been noted, experience reveals that these improvements tend to be temporary. Fullan (2005), in talking about large-scale reform, said, “it is a bit unfair to characterize the best success as incremental inertia, but in terms of sustainability, that label is not too far off the mark” (p. 1). Hopkins and Levin (2000) and Levin (2001) in their analysis of reforms claimed that most mandated reforms were often poorly designed and not well implemented. Furthermore, a majority of the reforms were too inflexible to meet local conditions, were poorly resourced, created teacher opposition, were modified to suit varying political pressures, and were often abandoned before they had a chance to bear fruit. Moreover, most reforms changed few teaching practices and resulted in minimal improvement in student achievement gains.

In this brief paper, I discuss some strategies that might be used to ensure that reform initiatives are sustainable. I make an argument for systemic approaches. By systemic reform, I mean the development of coherence in goals and outcomes, expectations and activities, and norms and values that further the complexities of learning of all within the tri-level system (i.e., ministry, school division, and schools and their community). Systemic thinking implies connectedness, relationships, and context—a holistic or ecological perspective.

### **Sustainability and Capacity Building Defined**

It is important that the reader have a clear conception by what is meant by sustainability and capacity building. For the purposes of this paper, I modify Fullan’s (2005) and Hargreaves and Fink’s (2005) overlapping definitions of sustainability. Fullan defined sustainability as “the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose (p. ix). Hargreaves and Fink, on the other hand, defined sustainability as “leadership and improvement [that] preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm to and indeed create positive benefit for other around us, now and in the future” (p. 17). For both authors, sustainability means more than whether something lasts. It also implies “how particular initiatives can be developed without compromising the development of others in the surrounding environment now and in the future” (Hargreaves & Fink, p. 17). It is in this vein that I use the word sustainability. It also implies that, when a reform initiative is implemented, it must be sustained but in a sense that individuals and groups continually learn from their experiences with the change and they continue to develop capacity in what they are attempting to change. Such a definition of sustainability implies that the change initiative is part of the individual’s and group’s way of working—it is part of their belief system and capacity is continually enhanced.

Capacity building involves developing individual and collective ability such that disposition, skills, knowledge, motivation and resources are available for future change and action. Where there is limited or no capacity, it is difficult to bring about any change. When professional staff in schools have had positive experiences with change, they are more likely to engage in future change (Hargreaves & Fink, 2005). Where the disposition, skills, knowledge, motivation, and resources are lacking, capacity for change is limited.

### **Teaching and Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Reform initiatives for the 21<sup>st</sup> century have to be based on a different worldview. Many of us have argued that teaching and learning for a knowledge society has to be different from the linear Newtonian worldviews of schooling in the past and replaced with an ecological approach (Hargreaves, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Sackney, in press). From an ecological perspective, the tensions and confusions that have resulted from a clockwork worldview are not sustainable and one solution advanced in recent years is the notion of the learning community. The ideas that underpin the learning community construct are of wholeness and connections, diversity and complexity, relationships and meanings, reflection and inquiry, data collection and analysis, and collaboration and collegiality (Mitchell & Sackney, p. 5). We can no longer operate from a mechanistic model where students are viewed as deficits. Instead, we need to view the educational system fundamentally as an ecological place of and for connections, relationships, reciprocity, and mutuality. From a learning community perspective, learning systems need to be connected rather than isolated.

The learning community model see knowledge gaps as opportunities and challenges to be explored and investigated. It is through collaboration, reflection, action research, shared understanding and responsibility, learner engagement, and data collection that teaching and learning can be improved. Building a learning community requires a paradigm shift in the way that educational organizations engage in teaching and learning. Learning drives the teaching function and educators can not be isolated from the total learning environment. What is required is coherence and mutuality at all levels of the educational enterprise.

### **What Does Research Have to Say About Sustainability?**

Fullan (2005), in his recent book on sustainability, reported a number of studies where low performing schools were able to close the gap between them and high performing schools. Citing a study reported by Togneri and Anderson (2003), he reported six strategies for improvement used by these districts. These districts:

1. Publicly acknowledged poor performance and sought solutions (building the will for reform)
2. Focused intensively on improving instruction and achievement
3. Built a system-wide framework and infrastructure to support instruction
4. Redefined and redistributed leadership at all levels of the district
5. Enhanced professional development activities
6. Recognized that there were no quick fixes (p. 2)

In an Alberta study of four consistently improving school districts, Maguire (2003) found the following features:

- A focus by the district's administration on improving student achievement, with at least one senior leader committed to the district's vision.
- Widespread, top-to-bottom understanding of the district's mission and goals.
- A collaborative culture which values leadership at all levels and employs transparent performance criteria which trigger both celebrations for success and consequences for inadequate performance.
- Significant efforts and resources aimed at classroom-embedded teacher development programs.
- Identification of principals as the primary instructional leaders in their schools and active contributors to district-level decisions.
- Recognition that action-research is essential to improvement and is part of the program to build instructional capacity and assessment literacy among district staff.

In all the above cases, leadership at the district and school levels was identified as being crucial to success. If reforms are to work, we need deep cognitive learning at all levels of the system, and particularly with teachers and students. Claxton (2002), for one, talks about developing learning power in students and teachers by helping them to become resilient, resourceful, reflective, and reciprocal.

From our own work on learning communities we recognize that informed practice must be understood as a collective quality and it must have strong connections to the wider knowledge environment. In essence, there has to be a component of capacity building as a basis of improvement. Otherwise, after a period of time minimal, if any, achievement gains will be evident.

We have also learned some lessons from state level reforms. In assessing England's National Literacy and Numeracy strategies (NLNS), Earl, Levin, Leithwood, Fullan and Watson (2003) concluded that the government used accountability and capacity building as a strategy and leadership was central to building success. Sixty-two percent of 11 year olds were at proficiency levels in 1997 in literacy; for numeracy, the figure was 61%. By 2002, the scores had reached 75% for literacy and 73% for numeracy. They found that achievement gains were made but after a number of years the results tended to level off. These findings seem to suggest that current strategies are not producing the achievement gains that were produced initially and that new strategies/or energy may be required to improve achievement gains.

The argument presented in this paper is that, if we are to achieve sustainability in our reforms, there is need for whole-system capacity building on an ongoing basis, or what I call systemic reform. This notion is rooted in complexity theory and ecological worldviews that see educational systems as an implicate order—one of wholeness, relationships, connections, reflexivity, and collaboration. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) argued that “an adaptive challenge is a problem for which solutions lie outside the current way of operating” (p.70). In many cases, reforms require people to think differently about their work, which is not easily sustained. What we need is for people to change their beliefs in a reform initiative and we know that beliefs change slowly.

Fullan (2005) contended that there are eight elements to sustainability: public service with a moral purpose, commitment to changing context at all levels, lateral

capacity building through networks, intelligent accountability and vertical relationships, deep learning, dual commitment to short-term and long-term results, cyclical energizing, and leadership. For an expansion of these concepts I refer you to his book.

A considerable amount of literature has alluded to the moral purpose of leadership (Fullan, 2003; Hargreaves & Fink, 2005; Walker & Sackney, in press). Moral leadership requires that leaders imbue the organization with the need to raise the bar and close the student learning gaps, treat all learners with demanding respect, and change the context for learning by working with other schools, districts, and provincial levels. It also means that all levels of the system must take moral purpose seriously and it starts with leadership. The energy must come from leadership at all levels of the system.

Changing the context entails changing the structures and culture within which one works. Fullan (2005), argued that this can be accomplished, in part, through purposeful interaction between and among the tri-level systems (p. 17). In my analysis of provincial policies on school improvement (Sackney, in press), many provinces now expect schools and school districts to set improvement targets and provide annual progress reports. In some cases, these progress reports have to be communicated to the provincial level. This approach will hopefully build capacity within and across all three levels of the system.

A way to enhance capacity in schools is to develop learning networks. The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in the United Kingdom is currently operating learning networks that comprises 200 schools. Six forms of learning are promoted in the networks: pupil learning, adult learning, leadership for learning and leadership development, school-wide learning, school-to-school learning, and network-to-network learning.

Another way intelligent accountability and vertical relationships can be attained is through a school review process (Fullan, 2005). Although policies vary across provinces, it appears that at least some form of self-assessment and in some cases external assessment is being advocated (for example, England and Wales have external school reviews which are then fed into the Federal level for further policy development). Schools need to collect data that are then used for improvement planning (See Alberta, 2004; Ontario, 2003).

What is required is a collaborative culture of inquiry that leads to deep learning. We need to develop capacity at all three levels to solve difficult or adaptive problems (Heifetz & Linsky, 2003). In this way, the system can make adjustments, revise, abandon and develop new strategies that improve learning.

Fullan (2005) argued that there has to be a dual commitment to short-term and long-term results. He stated that governments have to show progress in the short-term, but bearing in mind that capacity is developed for the long term.

Developing sustainability entails cyclical energizing. This is so because learning is not a linear process. Furthermore, the set of strategies that lead to improvement may after a period of time not lead to higher productivity. Instead, new strategies and energy is required to move learning to a level higher. In the following sections, I outline some leadership strategies for building sustainability for learning and teaching improvement.

## **Systemic Leadership**

This section briefly reviews some leadership strategies that are required for sustaining systemic reforms.

### ***Leadership at the Provincial Level***

Fullan advocated ten guidelines for provincial leaders.

1. The reality test—He advocated that Ministry people make system thinking and sustainability part of their agenda.
2. Moral purpose—From a moral purpose, system leaders need to shift the power from central levels to local levels where the teaching and learning occur.
3. Get the basics right—Fullan argued that Ministry people need to raise the floor in literacy and numeracy in those schools and districts where performance is low. At the same time, the ministry people also need to close the gap between the highest and lowest schools and districts.
4. Communicate the big picture—Ministry leaders need to define a clear picture and then communicate the overall purpose and plan.
5. Opportunities for locals to influence the big picture—There has to be plenty of interaction and input among all of the levels of the system.
6. Intelligent accountability—Ministry people need to be concerned about assessment of learning and assessment for learning. Governments typically overemphasize assessment of learning at the expense of assessment for learning. Fullan also contended that the government needs to challenge consistently low-performing school districts on the evidence base with the assistance of expert practitioners.
7. Incentivize collaboration and lateral capacity building—Building collaborative and lateral capacity allows districts and schools to improve.
8. The long lever of leadership—Leadership is the long lever of change and it is through leadership that change occurs. We have advocated the development of “communities of leaders”(Sackney & Mitchell, 2005).
9. Design every policy, whatever the purpose, to build capacity—Fullan said, “every new policy is an occasion to question and promote greater capacity in the system” (p. 96). He further claimed that accountability concerns are always high on system leaders list but capacity building is not.
10. Grow the financial investment in education—“Sustainability is resource generative and resource hungry” (p. 97). However, new initiatives should not simply be viewed as an add-on. Capacity building means that other resources can be reallocated, or new resources found.

### ***Leadership at the District Level***

Just as school’s have a culture so too do school divisions. Fullan, Bertani and Quinn (2004) after reviewing their work with school districts identified ten key lessons.

1. Leading with a compelling driving conceptualization—Deep district reform requires that district leaders that are system thinkers—that is, district leaders need to have a compelling vision of what they want to attain and how to get there.

- They suggested utilizing pluralized leadership, coherent strategies, and plenty of two-way communication.
2. Collective moral purpose—District leaders need to constantly communicate the moral purpose. They need to foster an attitude of district improvement as opposed to competition amongst schools and encourage schools to work together.
  3. The right bus—Getting the right people and focusing on re-culturing and restructuring as way of improving learning outcomes is important.
  4. Capacity building—District leaders need to encourage professional development and a daily habit of working together. The notion of the learning community needs to be highly visible.
  5. Lateral capacity building—District leaders need to foster and promote network development and learning.
  6. Ongoing learning—A focus on assessment for learning (provincial strategy). District leaders need to ensure that schools have the skills required for assessing, disaggregating, and using student achievement data as a tool for ongoing improvement. School-based self and peer reviews should be encouraged (provincially and district).
  7. Productive conflict—Successful organizations learn from mistakes while being disciplined about what they learn. Our work on learning communities (Sackney, Mitchell & Walker, 2005) showed that schools that were exemplars of learning communities all exhibited productive conflict. In fact, when asked about conflict, staff usually stated, “we don’t have conflict, it is a way of doing our work.”
  8. A demanding culture—District leaders need to work to develop high-trust culture at the district and school levels. They need to foster a demanding culture that does not accept unsatisfactory performance.
  9. External partners—Improving districts have active partners/networks with diverse agencies such as business groups, community-based organizations, universities, and federations—that help to build capacity.
  10. Growing financial investments—Sustaining districts are resource hungry, but they also know how to attract resources and how to use the available resources for best effect.

### ***Leadership at the School Level***

In our work and the work of others, leadership at all levels needs to be sustainable. In their recent book, *Sustainable Leadership*, Hargreaves and Fink (2005) set out seven principles for sustainable leadership: depth of learning and real achievement rather than superficially test performance; length of impact over the long haul, through effective succession practices; breadth of influence, where leadership is a distributed responsibility; justice in ensuring leadership actions do no harm and benefit students in other schools; diversity that replaces standardization and alignment with diversity and cohesion; resourcefulness that conserves and renews leaders; and conservation that builds on the best of the past to provide an even better future.

Fullan (2005), in his recent book, *Leadership and Sustainability*, called for the development of systems thinkers. Using Senge’s (1990) notion of the fifth discipline, he called for a more holistic approach to leadership. He saw capacity building as the

development and use of policies, strategies, and actions that increased the efficacy of systems to engage in continuous improvement. Recently, Walker and Sackney (in press) similarly elaborated on the need for an ecologically-based approach to leadership.

In developing a systemic approach to leadership, we need to develop opportunities for networking and collaboration that can increase leaders' capacities to see a broader perspective to school improvement. In this regard, Fullan stated, "Leaders at the system level need to engage other levels so that policies and strategies are shaped and reshaped, and the emerging bigger picture is constantly communicated and critiqued" (p. 44).

Sustainable leadership requires building capacity in others. Leaders need to understand that the people with the problem are the problem, and they are the solution (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). What leaders need to do is to develop a demanding culture that raises the levels of expectation—for students and teachers. In the next section I outline some strategies at each of the tri-levels.

### **Suggestions for Sustainability of Systemic Reforms**

This paper is about systemic reform of what has to happen at the school/community, division, and provincial levels if we are to sustain reforms. In this section, I outline some strategies for systemic reform that would ensure the sustainability of improvement goals. I have organized the recommendations on the basis of the ministry, school division and school/community levels.

#### ***Ministry Level***

1. In developing reform policies and strategies, the Ministry needs to ensure that there is coherence in its policies and strategies. In many cases, school divisions and schools see government policies being implemented and shortly thereafter being abandoned or being poorly sustained. In other cases, minimal support, financial and capacity building is provided. What has to happen is there is need to clearly communicate the priorities and future goals of the Ministry and to ensure that these priorities and plans are coherent with future directions. This is what Fullan calls communicating the big picture—the overall purpose and plan.
2. The Ministry needs to develop more sophisticated policies and strategies that focus on capacity building and improved accountability processes at all levels. In many instances, Ministry people develop policy and strategies with little, if any, accountability measures. Furthermore, before developing its policies and strategies the Ministry needs to determine if the system has the capacity to implement these policies and strategies. If the school divisions and schools do not have the capacity, then leadership and training needs to be provided to ensure that these capacities are developed.
3. The Ministry needs to ensure that its policies provide forms of accountability, that is, assessment of learning and assessment for learning. While its main focus should be on assessment for learning, it also has to ensure that there is assessment of learning. If school divisions and schools do not have the skills to analyze, disaggregate, and use assessment data, then plans must be developed to provide

- those skills. It is therefore incumbent on the Ministry to work with universities and practitioners to provide the necessary training.
4. Based on my review of provincial improvement policies across Canada, most provinces are moving toward some form of school improvement planning that requires schools to collect data, develop plans for improvement (in many cases involving parents and the community), have school divisions/districts approve the plans, and then forward these plans to the Ministry. Furthermore, most provincial policies require schools and school division/districts to provide annual reports on the results of its improvement plans. It should be noted that in a Pan-Canadian study (Guppy, Crocker, Davies, Lapointe, & Sackney, 2006) of parent and teacher perceptions on this issue, both groups were highly supportive of such a policy. Data as defined in these assessments includes a variety of data types and sources (See Ontario Ministry guidelines; Earl & Katz, 2006; Holcomb, 2004).
  5. Build capacity-lateral and downward—throughout the educational system. In this regard, there is need to build strong leadership capacity if the reforms are to be sustained. This also means building leadership capacity at all levels of the system—ministry, division, school, and classroom. Leadership is the key element in building sustainability of reforms. What is required is the development of learning community networks. A good example of this is the work of the National College for School Leadership in the United Kingdom.
  6. Make systems thinking and accountability part of systemic effort. Remember change that is far removed from the classroom stands a lower chance of success. Make teaching and learning your moral purpose. Our students deserve the best that we can give them. Unless school reforms drive down to the learning level, not much will change in student learning. As Hopkins (2001) stated, “. . . unless school improvement strategies impact directly on learning and achievement then we are surely wasting our time” (p. xii).
  7. The Ministry needs to continue its efforts in ensuring that students who come to school from difficult environments are given the opportunities to be successful in school. The School<sup>PLUS</sup> reform, if successfully implemented, should help to ensure that the gap between the haves and the have nots is narrowed. Early intervention and prevention services are crucial in this regard, as is working with parents and the community.
  8. Provincial policy needs to be informed by the growing research literature on knowledge management, learning communities, and effective teaching and learning.
  9. The province needs more design-based research to develop and test the kinds of instructional systems that can support focused teaching and learning (Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006).

### *Division Level*

1. School divisions need to ensure that their policies and strategies align with provincial policies and strategies. The goals and priorities need to be clearly stated and communicated. These goals and priorities have to be communicated

- regularly and lived by the board and central administration. It is not sufficient to simply identify the goals and priorities without living these out in daily work.
2. School division leaders need to ensure that lived values focus on teaching and learning. Everything the school division does should reflect these values. As a result, the division needs to have in place mechanisms for the assessment and evaluation of division and school performance. Such policies should require schools to have a school improvement plan that takes into consideration all of its varied data and that involves parents in the process. All plans should be forwarded to the division office for comment.
  3. Ensure that school staff has the skills to interpret, use, analyse and plan on the basis of its assessment data. Focus on assessment for learning as the basic vehicle for improving instruction. Develop trust in the use of assessment data. Ensure that someone from the division office is responsible for helping schools to interpret and use data. Data has no value if it simply sits in someone's office in an aggregated form.
  4. Focus on improving teaching and learning in schools. Teaching in a knowledge society may mean that some teachers do not have the skills to teach in ways that help students to successfully learn. In this regard, investment in professional development is a must. Problem-based professional development that is school-based is the most useful.
  5. Encourage networking of schools—within the division and beyond the division. A focus on problem solving will assist schools to share strategies and knowledge that will be useful to schools. Do not rank schools as better or worse but instead encourage successful schools to help those that are less successful.
  6. Build capacity in the system through mentoring, networking staffing practices, and professional development. Create the culture for the learning community—in fact, ensure that every school is a learning community. As such, schools should be places of reflection, action research, collaboration, risk-taking, data based decision making, and learning-oriented. Ask learning questions of school leaders and staff.
  7. Develop the moral capacity of the system—These values will go a long way towards improving the motivation and learning of everyone in the system. Remember the culture of the school division indicates to the schools the expectation and values that are expected in its schools. Model teaching and learning throughout the system.
  8. The role of the divisions is to ensure whole-system change. As such, they must pay attention to the work of other school divisions and to Ministry policymakers.

### *School/Community Level*

1. Ensure that the school's mission and vision is consistent with that of the Ministry and school division and that meets the unique needs of the school. This vision and mission needs to be collaboratively developed and regularly communicated to all school stakeholders.
2. Build the learning capacity of your school. Ensure that your school reflects learning community theory and practice. The school should be a place for

- reflection, collaboration, risk taking, data-based decision making, shared responsibility, high trust, and where communities of leaders exist.
3. Collect data, analyze data, disaggregate data, and learn from the data as to what does or does not work. Use the data as the basis for your school improvement planning. Data comes in various forms, both formal and informal. Involve your parents and students in developing your school improvement plans and then report back to them on the outcomes of your goals and priorities.
  4. Build capacity in your school. As leader, you serve as the moral yardstick by which every one else will judge the school. Model learning for others.
  5. Develop collaborative learning networks with other schools within the school division and beyond the school division. Be a learner. Invest in professional development. Develop deep learning strategies.
  6. The role of school leaders is to help provide the focus and expert support system for all teachers so that they can personalize each classroom with greater instructional precision. In this regard, Fullan et al. (2006) argued that future principals will need to know a great deal more about teaching and learning and the associated support systems than they currently do.

### *Conclusion*

What I have called systemic reform, Fullan (2005) called the “tri-level solution.” He argued that the tri-level solution represents a total system focus—“a self conscious attempt at all levels to use best knowledge to strategize and bring about improvements and build capacity” (p. 210). For him, capacity building is the development and use of policies, strategies, and actions of organizations or systems to improve student learning. In this paper, I have argued that schools focus on student learning; divisions focus on developing infrastructures and monitor such development; and provinces focus on policies and strategies. Provinces need to become knowledgeable and action oriented about fostering capacity building along with accountability.

I have advocated a systemic basis for sustaining reform. In essence, this means that policies and practices at the provincial level, the school division level, and school level are aligned and that there is coherence to what happens at each level. I have also argued that reforms have to be classroom anchored and that utilize the learning community theory and practice as the basis for sustainability. A further implication of this model is that there has to be open communication at all levels of the education system, that practices be based on the best available research at the time, and that policies be student and teacher focused. I have also argued that we need to better utilize assessment for learning and assessment of learning if we are to improve learning for all students. Finally, if we are to close the gap between the haves and the have nots we need moral leadership as the vehicle for improvement.

In essence, we need to engage the three levels for system-wide success. By utilizing a systemic approach to reform, we should constantly seek and develop better ideas and practices (or what I call the knowledge dimension) and we will be in a better position to develop greater coherence and shared commitment to a higher moral purpose. My argument is that coherence among the multiple levels of schooling—the classroom, the school and the larger system (school division and province) is the important

precondition for school reform. As Fullan et al. (2006) stated, “The flow of schooling is disrupted when there is lack of alignment and coherence. Teachers and school administrators receive mixed messages when no one direction is pursued consistently over time. Instead of flow, there is perpetual turbulence, and this tendency of systems to create turbulence confounds attempts to institutionalize systematic reform” (p. 27).

I have also argued that in order to bring about reform in education there has to be capacity throughout the system. Capacity building is what most policymakers neglect. Capacity building entails using strategies that increase the collective effectiveness of all levels of the system. Capacity building has to occur vertically and horizontally and it is through the various networks that we can convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Capra (2002) argued for organizations to be viewed as living systems. His thesis is that a machine can be controlled but living systems can only be disturbed. He further claimed that meaningful disturbances will get the organization’s attention and will trigger structural changes. In order to obtain disturbance, we need a strong sense of community and collective identity around which a common set of values are shared. My argument is that in education we need this strong sense of community if we are to build a sustainable ecological society that can respond to the knowledge society of which we are a part.

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