Teacher Effectiveness: Expanding the Solution

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There is no substantial gap in what we need to know in order to improve schools and student learning and achievement on a very wide scale. In this brief paper I will (1) encapsulate what we obviously know; (2) what we should know but fail to understand (which thus makes finding the solution less likely); and (3) identify the action implications for teachers themselves, principals, district leaders, and system leaders.

1. What We Obviously Know

We can identify the key things we know, many of which have been more precisely portrayed in the past three years.

On the obvious side (yet still difficult to implement on a wide scale) we know that:

1. Teachers strong on content and pedagogical knowledge, and who care deeply (have moral purpose) about learning and students are more effective.

2. Teachers who use internal (assessment for learning) and external (assessment of learning) data on an ongoing basis for both improving learning and marking progress are more effective.

3. Teachers who learn from others (again, on an ongoing basis) inside and outside the school are more effective.

4. Teachers who are led by principals and other school leaders who foster the first three qualities are more effective.

5. Teachers in districts that focus on developing district-wide cultures that develop and cultivate the previous four elements are more effective.

6. Teachers in state systems that integrate accountability and capacity building while establishing partnerships across the three levels (school and community, district, and state) are more effective.

Here is some of the most recent cross-cutting evidence. Leithwood and his colleagues (2006) findings on "seven strong claims about successful school leaders" cover several of the findings just identified. Citing teacher quality as the strongest causal determinant of learning, Leithwood's first claim is that "school leadership is second only to classroom teaching" in impacting student achievement. In particular, school leaders indirectly but powerfully affect teachers and in turn, student learning through "building vision and direction, understanding and developing people, redesigning the organization [to establish effective working conditions], and managing the teaching and learning program" (p. 7). More particularly, the authors say that effective school leadership affects directly teacher capacity, motivation and commitment, and working conditions which in turn "alters teaching practices" linked to student learning and achievement.

The qualities of teachers and the conditions under which they work are powerfully related to whether we will have enough teachers on any scale to invest and sustain the energy and actions necessary for continuous improvement.

Susan Moore Johnson's (2004) *Finders and Keepers* makes it painfully clear that high quality teachers will come, and stay (all the while getting better) only under supportive, and let's be clear, demanding conditions, i.e., conditions and cultures that have very high expectations for adults and students, and pursue these relentlessly through a combination of support and accountability.

Across the pond, Chris Day and his colleagues (2007) in England have even more definitively demonstrated that teachers matter. Teachers in their sample who sustained commitment over time did so because of a combination of leadership (of the kind identified by Leithwood, et al), colleagues (all the things we know about collaborative cultures), and personal support from family and friends (something less well studied in North America). Teachers undergoing declining commitment did so because of "workload", "pupil behavior", and "poor or unsupportive leadership" — the very things that effective organizations address.

We know all this, and I have recently brought together a lot of the most recent findings in the 4th edition of *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (2007). The question is why are we not doing something to use this proven knowledge on a wide scale. The next section addresses this more subtle and fundamental question.

2. What We Should Know But Fail To Understand

Most of the obvious solutions — focus on standards, provide mentoring, establish professional learning communities — turn out to be superficial. This is not because they are not on the right track, but rather because they fail to realize how other more fundamental conditions need to be at the core of any effort. And these core conditions which I will spell out briefly are very difficult to change. Let me put it dramatically via Peter Cole's (2004) wry article, "Professional development: A good way to avoid change". Professional development is workshops, and no matter how relevant they are, it is not the same as learning every day. It feels like progress, but in reality does not make an impact.

Elmore (2004) nailed the problem when he observed:

> Improvement is … a function of learning to do the right things in the setting where you work. (p. 73)

Alas,

> The problem [is that] there is almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and substantial learning about their practice in the settings in which they actually work, observing and being observed by their colleagues in their classrooms and classrooms of other teachers in other schools confronting similar problems. (p. 73)

These are profound conclusions. Only a radical change in the working conditions of schools and indeed in the entire culture of the teaching profession will produce continuous learning on a large scale.

In *Breakthrough* which we define as full success (95% for example, in literacy for all), we set out what it will take for this to happen (Fullan, Hill & Crévola, 2006). We argued that three Ps need to be put in place: precision, personalization, and personal learning. Precision and personalization are about meeting the unique needs of each and every student on a timely and precise basis. Professional learning (note that we did not say professional development) consists of every teacher learning every day individually and collectively. The entire system must be organized to make this happen. Put another way, the six components of success, which I summarized in section one, currently affect only a minority of teachers *because* there has been a failure to tackle the deeper structural and cultural barriers at work.

It is not just a matter of new opportunities and supportive conditions. There are deep cultural barriers to be overcome. In *Breakthrough* we reported that several major, high profile, well funded district-wide reform efforts failed to get inside the classroom on any scale, and that this "deprivatization" of teaching still represents a huge cultural as well as structural barrier. Until it becomes normal for all teachers to observe each others' teaching facilitated by teacher leaders and other experts we will not have the conditions necessary for built-in change.

And it is not just elevating the role of principals as instructional leaders, and providing them with plenty of professional development. Ironically, as the role of the principal as key change agent is being recognized at all levels, more and more expectations are being added with little being taken away and little direct support. As the role of the principal becomes more and more important, the *principalship* is in danger of sinking!

This problem cuts more than one way. On the one hand, studies of the principalship show that the managerial tasks, arising from accountability and related bureaucracy, have become more and more onerous. On the other hand, many principals appear more comfortable with the managerial role. The large study of the principalship just conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) found both of these aspects at work. Yes, paperwork had increased dramatically, but PWC also notes that many principals appear to be "more comfortable with an operational [managerial] role than a strategic one" (p. vii). In other words, principals leading change (of the kind reported by Leithwood) focus on strategic issues first and take care of bureaucracy otherwise, while many other principals do the administration, managerial work first, and engage in strategic change if they have time (which of course they never do).

I say all this to conclude how complex the solution will be. It is structural and normative and implicates all levels of the system.

3. Action Implications

In this short paper I can only outline that main implications for each of the roles, and it will take major efforts from all roles working from the inside and in relation to other roles.

For Teachers

Teachers themselves, individually and collectively must take the position that autonomous individualism is verboten. They must endorse and treat as non-negotiable the value of interactive professionalism — teachers learning from and contributing to the learning of other teachers. These activities must go deep into the classroom and instruction. The agenda involves fostering substantial professional learning communities within schools, and clusters of schools learning from each other (what we call "lateral capacity building", Fullan, 2007).

Teachers must push other teachers and school principals to support powerful interactive professionalism, and be responsive to such opportunities when they present themselves. They must also provide leadership at the union level in pursuing this agenda. To put it dramatically, we need teachers at all levels to declare that interactive professionalism is more important than individual teacher autonomy.

For Principals

Again the push must come from the inside and the outside. On the one hand, in spite of current constraints, individual principals can (because many actually do) make the strategic change and override the managerial or operational role. We know as I said earlier what this role entails. At the same time we know that leaders developing other leaders as you go is as equally important as focusing on instruction (in fact, the two must be done together). In this way they mobilize collective leadership that has both a greater impact on the short run while providing a continuous pipeline of leaders for the immediate future.

Principals must also take the stance that individual school autonomy is not on. Schools learning from each other in purposeful clusters is

essential to larger scale system change.

Finally, principals must push district and system leaders to furnish the conditions necessary for success at the school level.

For District Administrators

The role of district administrators follow from the above. And it is not as straightforward as it might seem (see Fullan, 2007, Chapter 11). It includes getting the district organized for this work as well as forming a two-way partnership with schools. It obviously involves cultivating principals as strategic leaders, providing support to alleviate the managerial side of the role, establishing lateral capacity building of clusters of schools learning from each other.

The new role also requires "leading upward" to engage, relate and influence government policy.

For System Leaders

Some of the most powerful and interesting developments afoot concern the new roles for political leaders. Achieving large-scale reform simply has not worked despite half a century of major efforts and billions of dollars expended. Today, and most importantly, we are seeing some examples where government politicians and policy makers are putting into place policies and strategies that address the complexities of tri-level (school and community, district, and state) reform. We ourselves, are engaged directly in such an effort in Ontario. It involves integrating accountability, capacity building, and partnerships across the three levels (see Fullan, 2007, Chapter 12 for a description, and the recent symposia at AERA, 2007). Even more dramatically the McKinsey consulting company is currently conducting an analysis of the ten or more most successful school systems in the world to see what key policy levels are being employed to get consistently higher results across the whole system (study will be available by the summer of 2007).

We have covered highly complex terrain in this very brief treatment. There were aspects of reform that I was not able to address including early childhood, parents and community, and social and economic policies outside the education sector. Nonetheless, the core message in this paper is clear, but daunting to take up. The good news is that lack of knowledge about what to do is not the problem. The bad, but still exciting news, is that we are talking about complex, deep, systemic reform that has so far proven to be intractable. Even more exciting is that we are making progress on identifying and putting into place many of the key elements essential for lasting success.

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