Teachers for Teacher Excellence Debate

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This short piece addresses the question: "What strategy-based knowledge do we possess that will be effective in addressing the needs of the lowest performing 20% of students in large education systems?"

My first and most important response is that in order to improve part of the system you have to focus on the entire system — raise the bar and close the gap for all. But let me start with a single school example.

Brian Caldwell (2006) describes the case of Bellfield Primary School in Melbourne in which 80% of the pupils were from high poverty circumstances. From 1998 to 2004, Bellfield transformed itself from low to high performance with remarkable results. To take but one of many indicators, the state-wide literacy assessment for Grade 2 students was at 30.6% high achievement in Bellfield in 1998; but in 2004 it was 83.3%. The state-wide average in 2004 was 47% and the average for schools like Bellfield was 38.7%. This is a remarkable turnaround both in its own right and relative to comparators.

The principal, John Fleming, attributes this impressive success to four main pillars: (1) teacher-directed learning with a focus on the individual learning needs of all students; (2) a commitment to explicit instruction; (3) improving pupil's knowledge from short-term to long-term memory; and (4) none of the previous three pillars will work unless you have a very good relationship with each and every pupil (Caldwell, 2006:141).

These ideas are congruent with what we are learning in our own efforts at reform. However, Bellfield is only one school and I have argued in *Turnaround Leadership* (Fullan, 2006), that focusing only on turnaround schools represents a partial, non-sustainable solution. Instead we have to take the most powerful ideas and incorporate them in a comprehensive, sustained strategy that focuses on the total system. In *Turnaround Leadership* I provide two large scale examples in which we are having success: one is a large local authority — York Region District School Board (YRDSB), just north of Toronto, Ontario, which has 170 schools. The second example is the whole Province of Ontario which consists of 72 local authorities, 4,000 primary schools and 1,000 secondary schools. The details of the two cases are in *Turnaround Leadership*, and I have space only to highlight the main features here:

1. An explicit and relentless focus on raising the bar and closing the gap, especially in core areas of literacy and numeracy, and

in high school retention.

2. An investment in capacity building strategies at all levels. Capacity building concerns any strategy that increases the collective efficacy of teachers to improve student learning in achievement. The context of capacity building includes pedagogical or instructional knowledge and knowledge about the change process. The methods include focusing on the development of professional learning communities within schools (in which teachers learn from each other facilitated by teacher and administrative leadership); and strategies that enable clusters of schools to learn from each other in learning networks in what we call lateral capacity building.

3. Availability and transparency of data at all levels of the system that encompasses both 'assessment for learning' and 'assessment of learning'. Peter Hill, Carmel Crévola and I have furnished one comprehensive example in our recent book Breakthrough (2006). Such a system creates the conditions and means for teachers to learn all the time how to address the learning needs of students through using data to alter instruction, which in turn produces student learning.

4. Investment of additional financial resources which are called 'growing the financial investment', much of which is aimed at supporting the ideas in points (1) to (3).

5. Evolving positive pressure which is to say that the press for success is increasingly pinpointed to what we know that gets results; and in turn, provides pressure and support that is experienced as 'fair and reasonable'. For example, expectations that improvement should occur in relation and comparison to (a) one's own starting point, i.e., value-added improvement; (b) the performance of like schools (apples to apples); and (c) national and international benchmarks.

6. A clear understanding and commitment that the entire proposition depends on the quality of teachers, individually and how they work together. A sub-item here is that incentives are required to attract the best educators to work in the most difficult situations.

There are several other points such as how pursuing (1) through (6) leads to greater partnership with the community, parents, other social agencies, early childhood, and the like.

In the main, the criterion of success is that all schools and authorities improve albeit with the bottom 20% improving at a faster rate. We are continuing to pursue these strategies with the purpose being to establish sustainable system reform. Finally, we are also interested in the experiences of other countries attempting similar reforms so that we can learn from each other's experiences and strategies.

References

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