

Q&A with Michael Fullan

BY TRACY CROW



PROOF POSITIVE

The keys to successful school change are in our grasp

BY TRACY CROW

JSD: You've been a leading voice in the field of educational change for decades. What do you consider fundamental to successful change?

Fullan: The reason I can answer this so clearly is that we're now going from practice to theory rather than the other way around. The theory is well grounded. The fundamen-

tals of professional learning and change must first include two ideas. One is that everybody is engaged — we call it whole-system reform. It's all the schools in the district, all the classrooms in the schools, and all the districts in the province or the state. In terms of engagement, professional learning has to include everybody; otherwise, you only get piecemeal

TRACY CROW (tracy.crow@nsdc.org) is associate director of publications for the National Staff Development Council.

change. The other fundamental concern is the substance of the learning — to make sure that the focus is on each and every child. These days it's called personalization; it used to be called differentiated instruction. You're identifying the needs of individual children and then responding early to those needs with targeted engagement and structural improvement. That is the essence of it: Everybody is engaged in trying to solve the problem of learning for all students using

personalization and strategies that really pinpoint the needs and then mobilize the learning necessary to meet those needs, to get the results.

JSD: What are the steps to get to that point?

Fullan: Let me get more detailed on establishing the fundamentals. No. 1: Focus on a small number of goals. No. 2: Generate not only a belief but a reality that all kids can learn. No. 3: Focus on specific instructional strategies that will get at the individual needs of all students, and be sure that those specific strategies are tied in to assessment for learning. No. 4: The group is mobilizing to do the work and to learn from each other. This would be the principal and a literacy coach and teacher leadership team or school improvement team, extended to the rest of the staff. No. 5: The principal's role is to mobilize that group. And then the new extension is making sure the school is in a network of schools where the schools are learning from each other.

TAKING CHANGE SYSTEMWIDE

When we take this a step further, to really reach the system, we see a couple of other concepts that stand out in terms of what is fundamental. One is collective capacity. It is crucial



**INGREDIENTS
for professional
learning
highlighted
in this article:**

- Develop effective leaders.
- Identify high-yield strategies.
- Focus on every child.
- Emphasize collaborative learning.
- Leverage entire systems.

that we underscore the collective part of capacity, because it's the group, it's the whole school, it's the network of schools, it's the whole district, it's the whole state. The other, new concept that's coming out of this is an intriguing one, one we call collaborative competition. We've seen it in several districts now, where you actually see people trying to outdo each other, not in a mean way, but as a moral imperative, in a within-the-family way.

They're thinking, "This is important we get it right, and I can do better than you, and I can do better than myself."

Here's an analogy: Recently, Tiger Woods gave Sean O'Hair a tip about putting. Sean O'Hair is in the top five, so he's a close competitor of Tiger Woods, and they were in a win-lose situation. Why would Tiger do that? Not so much because he's a nice guy, but because people who are really good like other people to be good, too, and they want to compete against whoever's best. This is definitely a phenomenon we're seeing, and it's such a win, because instead of getting charter schools competing with other schools, where it's all about win-lose, this situation is win-win because successful schools are leveraging each other and they're getting more results for the overall purpose. Because finally, in all of these cases of successful change, there is a focus on the bottom line of results.

JSD: Would you talk about what you mean by motion leadership? You have a new book out by that title.

Fullan: Yes, and the subtitle on that is important – *Motion Leadership: The Skinny on Becoming Change Savvy* (Corwin Press, 2010).

ABOUT MICHAEL FULLAN

Michael Fullan is an internationally recognized expert in educational change. A prolific writer and speaker, Fullan has worked in schools and educational systems around the world, including his home province of Ontario, Canada. He partners with a variety of projects designed to engineer school improvement and is engaged in training, consulting, and evaluation of change projects. He is currently special policy adviser in education to the premier of Ontario.

Fullan's most recent books include:

- *All Systems Go: The Change Imperative for Whole System Reform*, Corwin Press, 2010.
- *Motion Leadership: The Skinny on Becoming Change Savvy*, Corwin Press, 2010.

- *Realization: The Change Imperative for Deepening District-Wide Reform* (with Lyn Sharratt), Corwin Press, 2009.
- *The Six Secrets of Change: What the Best Leaders Do to Help Their Organizations Survive and Thrive*, Jossey-Bass, 2008.
- *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, 4th Edition, Teachers College Press, 2007.
- *Turnaround Leadership*, Jossey-Bass, 2006.

He also writes frequent articles in publications worldwide. For a complete listing of articles and books, visit his web site at www.michaelfullan.ca.

(See NSDC Book Club selection on p. 7.) First of all, motion leadership is the kind of leadership that creates movement, positive movement. We're looking at going from a situation that's not so good to one that's much better or great. Then the "skinny on change" is identifying the smallest number of key factors that you need to focus on, factors that are high-powered, in the sense that if you do them together, you'll see lots of results for the effort. So, for example, make sure you work on fundamental goals, make sure you mobilize the group to work together — whether you call it professional learning community or collaborative culture doesn't matter. Make sure you link what you're doing to actual results, and that the data are transparent, and that you use the assessment data to improve instruction. In that book, we have "captured

ing, and in 12 months, with a new leader and using these ideas, they've moved up in literacy — reading, writing, and math — at grades 3 and 6, which are our measurement points in Ontario by the assessment agency. They've moved up from about 50% success to 75% across a very large elementary school. So that's the "skinny of change" in action, when a school can turn around that quickly and the teachers in the school say at the end of it, "We did it. We didn't think it was possible, but we did it." These teachers will never go back to the old way of doing things.

JSD: What was in place at the beginning of that 12-month period that put this school on that track?

Fullan: What kick-started it was a new, instructionally oriented principal, with lots of support from the dis-

trict. It couldn't be done without those two things. And the goal of the "skinny of change" is to excite people who are there to collaborate to do something different that they find satisfying and energizing. The driver has to be the principal and has to be in a district that has its act together in terms of resources and focus and support, but also pressure. The principal has to establish positive relationships with the staff by helping them achieve real success. The principal has to create ownership as quickly as possible by helping them experience changes that get students and staff engaged in learning in a way that they have never been before. They see the results within a year. Only instructionally grounded principals who are also good at relationship building can do this in short order.

This school is not isolated. We

JSD: Going beyond the school now, how do you build that collective capacity that is so important?

Fullan: I write about this in another recent book, *All Systems Go* (Corwin Press, 2010). In terms of systems, I mean the whole country, the educational system, or a whole state or province. Looking at these whole systems, I critique some of the strategies that are used at these bigger system levels. For example, take Arne Duncan's four pillars: 1) We've got to have common high standards, which we don't have now; 2) we have to invest in the quality of teachers and principals; 3) we have to have a strong database; and 4) we have to focus on the bottom 5,000 schools. None of those strategies touch collective capacity. Yes, high standards are great. They're necessary, but they're not sufficient. There's no capacity-building strategy if you just build the standards. If you add the data, which is the second of his pillars, great data systems, that's still not developing capacity. If you add the excellent teachers and excellent principals, that's what I call an individualistic strategy, not a collective strategy. It sounds good, but it's just producing individuals, it's not working on the collective. And then the fourth pillar, which is to turn around the bottom 5,000 schools. The issue is not to turn around 5,000 out of 100,000 schools, you've got to turn around their contexts, their districts. You've got to turn

The skinny boils down change to the smallest number of high-yield things you need to do to get substantial results.

the skinny" by looking at examples of this in action and drawing out the lessons. The skinny boils down change to the smallest number of high-yield things you need to do to get substantial results.

SKINNY CHANGE=FASTER CHANGE

The other concept that's part of the "skinny" is what I call the speed of quality change. With these strategies now, we are seeing substantial quality change within 12 months in a school. It's no longer going to take five years. At the same time, it is not going to be overnight, but positive results can be obtained in a very short time. We've featured schools — for example, Armadale Public School, which is one of the schools in York Region in Ontario — that have achieved remarkable change rapidly. Armadale has 900 students, 80% Tamil speak-

trict. It couldn't be done without those two things. And the goal of the "skinny of change" is to excite people who are there to collaborate to do something different that they find satisfying and energizing. The driver has to be the principal and has to be in a district that has its act together in terms of resources and focus and support, but also pressure. The principal has to establish positive relationships with the staff by helping them achieve real success. The principal has to create ownership as quickly as possible by helping them experience changes that get students and staff engaged in learning in a way that they have never been before. They see the results within a year. Only instructionally grounded principals who are also good at relationship building can do this in short order.

around the whole system. Overall, there's currently a strong limiting bias in favor of strategies that don't get to capacity much at all and certainly don't get to collective capacity.

With collective capacity, the group in combination is working on something and solving the problem together. We've learned this in the professional learning community's research and development that the DuFours and Eaker have carried out. Usually that has been just professional learning communities at a school. If I start adding collective capacity beyond that, it's the capacity of the district to partner with the schools to get things done.

THE POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE

When you look at what causes a student to learn well, it's not that somehow they had a great teacher along the way; an individual great teacher can do a lot of good, possibly turn around the future of a child. But really, if you look at a child going through grades K-12, it's those 13 years and the combination of teachers that are making the difference. That combination is collective.

In all of the solutions that we see

in *Motion Leadership* and the schools and districts in *All Systems Go*, the group got together and said, "We are going to not only have common standards, we're going to have common assessments, and we're all going to understand them." If we've got a collective approach in a school, and I'm a 3rd-grade teacher, the students that I get next year come from grade 2 in a way that they're way more prepared and consistent with what I'm doing, because we've had collaboration within the school to know what we're doing in a common way. These students have learned some of the basic instructional strategies of cooperative learning and strategies that work in reading and math. So what teachers inherit each year in that school are students who are better prepared because of what the students did the year before.

When we see this capacity in the district, the same thing applies. If a person is an assistant principal in one school and gets promoted to principal in another school in the district, they find commonality there, if the district has been working on collective capacity. What you get out of the collective are two big things. One, the best ideas

are coordinated and therefore more focused and coherent, vertically and horizontally. And then secondly, you see what we call a greater "we-we commitment." A teacher in a collaborative school will stop thinking about "my children" only and start thinking about "our children" in the school. A principal in a given school will stop thinking just about "my school" in isolation and will think about the success of other schools as a collectivity. We have 72 districts in Ontario, and this is how the directors and the superintendents think as well. They think, "I am a district, I'm one of 72, but I'm also part of trying to improve the entire public system of Ontario. If the entire public system improves, that's a goal that I can share in." You've got this double whammy of positive forces, the ideas are more accessible and used, and the sense of bigger commitment is greater, and therefore you're more motivated to do something. Because the ideas are there, you're able to do it better.

In *All Systems Go*, I show how we've used these strategies in Ontario and how 4,000 elementary schools have improved their literacy and numeracy on the average over the last

five years, quite significantly. Nine hundred high schools have gone from 68% in high school graduation to 77%, and the rate is still moving up every year. These are very impressive collective results, and it's because we've been using these whole-system concepts.

When you cause the collectivity to change the way I've described it, you have a collaborative, cultural change, not just at schools but of the entire public system.

JSD: You sound optimistic.

Fullan: I am, I'm excited. I'm optimistic for two reasons. For one thing, we can actually describe this systemwide change now in a very pin-

are successful, like Alberta and Ontario in Canada, Finland, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea, have a much lower gap between high and low. When health economists look at the data, the findings are crystal clear: You're more likely to die younger, on the average, if you live in a society with a wider gap. It doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor, though the poor die faster. You're more likely to have a higher percentage of people in jail, and your health costs are higher. Economic development and performance is lower. Everything that you would say in society that counts as humanly important — a better life, better health, more cohesion, more individual happiness,

been looking at the details of educational change for 40 years, and the field has evolved. For one thing, we're tackling bigger parts of the problem. When I started in the early days, we were looking at innovative schools, small-scale reform. Then the effective schools research came along in the '70s, and we still weren't talking about systems. And then we had *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), which pointed out problems in the system, but nobody really responded. Finally, in 2002, with *No Child Left Behind*, we see a system response of a big nature for the first time. The evolution has been to recognize that you have to solve the bigger set of issues, not just the small set of a classroom and a school. So that perspective has become larger.

Also, the investment in innovation, development, success, and the research associated with that has also accumulated. And most importantly, we now have scores of practitioners who are practicing this. All my best ideas are coming from practitioners doing this work — principals, superintendents, literacy coaches, and so on. The sheer number of practitioners who are now doing this is may still only be 20% of the total group, but it's still a big number, and it's a growing number. We have never had so many people in the field that represent these ideas in action as we do now, in 2009. But there are still many ways to go wrong. We have to use what we know and realize that scores of committed practitioners doing this work collectively every day is the only thing that will get us there. The good news is that this is within our grasp.

REFERENCE

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform.* Washington, DC: Author. ■

The investment in innovation, development, success, and the research associated with that has also accumulated. And most importantly, we now have scores of practitioners who are practicing this. All my best ideas are coming from practitioners doing this work — principals, superintendents, literacy coaches, and so on.

pointed way. The clarity and the specificity of the strategy are very well operationalized and transparently observable. And secondly, politicians and policy makers are increasingly interested in this, because the old strategies haven't worked, and these look like they *should* work. The benefits are political; that is, you're more likely to get re-elected if you make improvements in the public system. And they can see that moral purpose is another benefit.

THE WHOLE SOCIETY BENEFITS

Societal cohesion is part of an even bigger picture. Research around the world shows the relationship between the gap in educational performance in a country and the economic, social, and emotional consequences of the gap between low- and high-achieving educational systems. The U.S. has a wide gap. Most of the countries that

greater collective good, more money, economic development at the individual and societal level — the rates of those things go up as the gap becomes smaller. So this is an attractive societal proposition that's proven by way of the data, and now we have the micropicture, which is what it actually looks like to do this kind of reform on the ground in each and every classroom. This is why I'm optimistic, because these two things — macro indicators and micro reforms — look like they could easily intersect now, more so than in the past.

JSD: Are we at this point because of the age of the field and the collection of knowledge we have about what works? You wrote earlier this year that we're in this coming-of-age period for large-scale reform.

Fullan: In a way, that's true. I've