

THE LEARNING System

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

KEY DRIVERS FUEL INTERNATIONAL SUCCESSES

By Anthony Armstrong

Peeering across international borders for education success stories has become increasingly popular recently. However, understanding another system's successful reform model, along with the role professional learning plays, is loaded with challenges. Contextual and cultural factors in other nations make replicating a transplanted model next to impossible.

Education consultant and author Michael Fullan offers a lens through which education leaders can examine international models on a systemic level. In *Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform* (Fullan, 2011), written for the Centre for Strategic Education, Fullan presents four "right" drivers of education reform that should be primary motivators and contrasts them with "wrong" drivers that, while valid, should be a secondary consideration and not used to lead reform.

In Finland and Singapore, two countries where impressive success in education is influenced by cultural and contextual factors, determining the primary drivers can help educators glean clear lessons to adapt in their contexts.

Finland and Singapore serve as models of high-performing systems.



BUILD CAPACITY

The first right driver Fullan presents is what he calls the "learning-instruction-assessment nexus," or capacity building. The wrong driver, as a polar opposite, is accountability. Fullan asserts that instead of focusing on accountability as the driver for reform, through such things as test results and teacher evaluations, improving instruction should be the driving force behind change efforts (Fullan, 2011, p. 8).

In labeling assessments and evaluations as wrong drivers for system reform, Fullan reiterates that he is not discounting their value, as long as they are smaller parts of a complex system built on drivers that are more likely to lead to successful results (Fullan, 2011, p. 9).

Finland's strong teacher preparation programs and a culture of capacity building, shared leadership, and teacher collective responsibility have created a cultural trust that frees their education leaders from needing accountability systems to build social confidence. "The fact that there seems to be very little interest in Finland in instituting the assessment and external account-

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Effective professional learning requires leadership at all levels

Oh, that effective professional learning did not require leadership. It would be so convenient. No one would have to take initiative or responsibility. No one would have to be accountable. Professional learning would just “happen,” like spontaneous combustion.

It’s a nice fantasy, but in the real world of public education, nothing — positive or negative — happens without leadership. That’s why Leadership is one of the seven Standards for Professional Learning.



It’s important to understand all the Leadership standard encompasses. Otherwise, one might assume that it refers only to educators in positions of authority, such as superintendents and school administrators. Their roles are important, but the standard makes the point that effective professional learning requires leadership at all levels of K-12 education.

Because school boards are charged by state laws to be responsible for local school systems, their leadership for

professional learning is essential. Their first responsibility is to understand that increasing student performance depends on educators engaging in rigorous, sustained learning experiences. When school boards commit to that proposition, they assert their leadership by providing the vision, funding, oversight, and accountability to ensure that professional learning is effective.

Of course, most school boards are composed of citizens who serve part-time. It is up to a school system’s professional staff to provide the day-to-day leadership that professional learning requires. That begins with the superintendent and appropriate central office staff understanding the Standards for Professional Learning and using them as a guide. Their leadership manifests when they set high expectations for professional learning and organize it to increase the capacities of educators who interact with students each day. That requires clear and frequent communications, strong management, and monitoring of professional learning as it occurs.

In past years, many principals have been passive about professional learning. They have left it to the central office or the initiative of individual teachers. This is rapidly changing as learning communities become ubiquitous and principals’ roles in teacher evaluation come under greater scrutiny. Principals who are effective leaders know that professional learning is the most important tool at their disposal to improve the effectiveness of their teachers. They advocate

for teacher learning experiences that are responsive to students’ learning needs, and they are vigilant that such experiences make effective use of teachers’ experience, talents, and time. More importantly, principal leaders support teachers’ classroom use of new learning, and they partner with teachers to seek evidence that the teachers’ application of that learning improves student performance.

Many teachers complain that too often they have only been passive recipients of professional learning. That will not change without more assertive teacher leadership, with teachers advocating on their own behalf, forcefully describing and demanding the professional learning they need to successfully overcome students’ learning challenges. Teachers can take the lead in making sure that learning communities function effectively, focus relentlessly on improving instruction, and document results. Even the most timid of teachers can lead by demonstrating that collaboration with a coach can lead to more productive practice.

The potential for effective professional learning to become the reality in every school, every school system, and every state is palpable with strong, skillful leadership. For that to occur, educators at all levels will have to exert leadership, not expect that it will just “happen” or that “someone else will do it.”

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4 initiatives help small office serve large district

As told to Anthony Armstrong

In the past, our districtwide staff development program has offered a large catalog of courses to employees. However, we saw a need to streamline the catalog and add additional services to better meet the professional learning needs of the schools. We conducted a review, analyzing the courses we offered, any overlap between courses, and the impact of course participation on student achievement data. Based on that review, Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) embarked on four new initiatives designed to provide more targeted services to the local schools.

PROTOCOLS TRAINING

Gwinnett schools and departments have been using protocols, to varying degrees, for many years. To ensure that protocols are used more broadly and consistently, we offer protocols training to promote and support teacher collaboration. Training includes protocols for framing conversations relevant to instructional needs, analyzing student work, using data to drive decisions, and determining best practices through research and analysis.

FACILITATOR TRAINING

Facilitator training is similar to protocols training but with a different audience. Both are designed to empower staff developers closest to the work (at the local school), but

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facilitator training is designed to share Learning Forward's definition of professional learning, Standards for Professional Learning, and how the Innovation Configuration maps can be used to guide our work. These sessions focus on strategies for using adult learning theory, for determining session goals and objectives and designing experiences to meet them, for assessing outcomes, and for developing plans for follow-up training and sustainability.

LESSON STUDY PILOT

We are piloting a lesson study program at three schools — one elementary, one middle school, and one high school. This unique opportunity allows us to assist schools in transforming their staff development programs into laser-focused, intensive staff development experiences designed to meet specific needs in their buildings. It is more than sharing lesson plans. Rather, teachers involved in lesson study collaborate with peers to develop a lesson, teach, observe, and collect data on the shared lesson. This process allows teachers to focus on teacher practice and observe the direct impact on student learning.

COACH ENDORSEMENT PROGRAM

Our coach endorsement program is designed to equip school and district coaches with the knowledge, skills, and support to have greater impact on teacher practice and student learning. The coach endorsement program provides a year of training and support, ranging from coaching fundamentals to restructuring the work of a learning team. Due to the job-embedded nature of coaching, this endorsement is responsive to local school and individual coaching needs by scaffolding components of the program to allow for appropriate transitions based on those needs. The coach endorsement focuses on the knowledge and skills needed to be successful as a coach and facilitates the application of new learning through guided practice and reflection with a lead coach.



In moving away from the generic, one-size-fits-all staff development catalog, we have the opportunity to work closely with local learning teams to strengthen capacity at the school level. With this shift in focus, Gwinnett's staff development program is stronger and better aligned with Learning Forward and its vision for staff development in our schools.

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ability regimes that have characterised the reform strategies of many OECD countries ... is perhaps the best evidence of the fundamental trust that seems to exist between the educators and the community” (OECD, 2011, p. 131).

This commitment to high-quality capacities creates a strong sense of collective and professional responsibility within schools’ collaborative learning communities and drives teacher professional learning.

For Singapore, said Tony Jackson, vice president of education for the Asia Society, “capacity is the lynchpin for success.” Its professional learning system relies on collaborative learning communities and is much more structured than the Finnish system. According to Jackson, “Singapore schools do a lot to improve teachers over time. For example, teacher-learning circles meet for eight two-hour sessions, over a period of four to twelve months. The learning circles meet, identify common problems, come up with solutions to those problems, pilot the solutions, and share the results with other teachers.”

Singapore teachers are expected to spend 20 hours per week working with colleagues during the school day, said Jackson. Additionally, they are expected to engage in 100 hours of professional learning each year outside the school.

Within the structure of their professional learning hours, teachers have the freedom to develop learning plans at the beginning of the year that are reviewed at the middle and end of the year. These reviews are not for a formal accountability review, explained Jackson. Instead, they are developmental tools that identify areas of focus for the following year.

“One of the things that is different about schools that have this kind of system,” said Jackson, “is that the teachers want to be a part of it. They want feedback that helps them improve. This is different from other systems entirely because the feedback is welcomed.”

VALUE SOCIAL CAPITAL

While much of the dialogue surrounding education reform emphasizes appraising and improving individual teachers, Fullan’s second driver stresses the importance

of using social capital to build collaborative cultures that foster individual development. Social capital resides not in individuals but in the relationships among them and how those relationships allow for the exchange of expertise and support.

Fullan argues that allowing all teachers to engage in daily peer-to-peer collaboration empowers them to take

ownership of their profession and ongoing, continuous instructional improvement (Fullan, 2011, pp. 13-14). This collaborative environment then feeds the growth of the human capital, or individual growth, by serving as both lateral and public accountability.

“It is important to realize that individual capital will never compensate social capital in school,” said Pasi Sahlberg, director general of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation in Helsinki, Finland, and author of *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn From Educational Change in Finland?* “In other words, teacher professional development should equally focus on developing collegiality among teachers, not just knowledge and skills of each teacher. This is what Finland has systematically done during the past two decades.”

According to Sahlberg, the strongest driver of teacher professional

learning in most Finnish schools is the autonomy the schools have to implement curriculum and annual work plans. Each school in Finland designs its own curriculum and the capacity to implement it invokes a stronger sense of commitment and collective responsibility than if it were created by outside parties.

To leverage social capital in Singapore, the Ministry of Education created professional teacher networks that “serve as catalysts for and support of teacher-initiated professional development through sharing, collaboration, and reflection,” said Jackson. The networks bring together master, lead, and beginning teachers and others to engage with each other through learning circles, teacher-led workshops, conferences, and publications.

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Singapore teachers are expected to spend 20 hours per week working with colleagues during the school day and engage in 100 hours of professional learning each year outside the school.

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According to Jackson, learning communities in Singapore and other high-performing countries are an expected part of the professional community and are not viewed as a perfunctory obligation. Singapore schools, he said, ensure that their teachers have the capacity to use the learning community structure well, whereas other lower-performing countries may treat learning communities as a human capital obligation that is fulfilled when a group of teachers are placed in the same room.

FOCUS ON PEDAGOGY

The proper role for technology in reform efforts, said Fullan, is as a tool to support the appropriate pedagogy (Fullan, 2011, p. 15). An ongoing challenge for many systems is the temptation to view technology as the primary driver for many solutions.

For Finland, pedagogical models and practices are at the forefront while technological tools are relegated to supporting the educational content and acting as links “between learning and study environments outside school” (Ubiquitous Information Society Advisory Board, 2010, p. 24).

“That’s the key,” said Jackson of Singapore’s use of technology. “They clearly see technology as an aid to high-quality instruction, not in place of it.”

IMPLEMENT SYSTEMICALLY

Instead of focusing on single pieces of reform that are linked together, Fullan asserts that systems must coordinate reform efforts systemically, including recruitment, professional learning, working conditions, and leadership roles as careers evolve (Fullan, 2011, p. 16).

“Schools can become real professional learning communities when all their members are from the same craft,” said Sahlberg. “Finnish schools are communities of learning and care where responsibility is distributed among all staff.”

Singapore’s teacher evaluation system is an example of a systemic driver through its holistic appraisal of teacher capacity. According to Jackson, it assesses a multitude of competencies for teachers, including student academic and character development, pedagogical initiatives the teachers have developed, professional learning activities, contributions they have made to their colleagues and their schools, and their relationships within the community. These holistic evaluations are conducted by a number of different people, including department heads and principals. The standards by which teachers are evaluated were developed with input at multiple levels, and included teacher input in the piloting and ongoing refinement.

“This vetting of the evaluation program by teachers is

HIGH MARKS FOR FINLAND AND SINGAPORE

For the last decade, Finland has consistently ranked as one of the top educational systems in every benchmark in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a survey of 15-year-olds in principal and industrialized countries (OECD, 2011, p. 118). Singapore ranked among the top education systems in the 2009 PISA survey, and has historically earned high marks on other international benchmarks. The United States, in contrast, earned only an average ranking in the 2009 PISA survey.

important for everyone’s buy-in,” said Jackson. “Everyone has to agree with the evaluation’s goals to be effective. The purpose of the evaluation is to create a dialogue that is frequent, clear, and detailed. It must also include how teachers can improve their craft, not just if they are doing well.”

For those system leaders who seek to learn from

the successes of other countries, Jackson emphasized the importance of studying globally but thinking locally. “It is critically important to learn from other countries and systems,” said Jackson. “But there has to be a redesign and adaptation to benchmark thinking to other places. We need to work on our own solutions and consider our own structure and social context to design processes to solve problems for our own states and cities to make systemic change.”

Learning Forward BELIEF

Professional learning decisions are strengthened by diversity.


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What drives your change?

In *Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform* (2011), Michael Fullan reminds us to examine the drivers behind our change efforts. Use this worksheet to analyze your current change efforts, explore the underlying assumptions, find areas to strengthen, and determine the next steps.

MOTIVATION

Capacity building vs. accountability

A focus on building capacity has been shown to motivate people and improve results. Accountability systems powered by high-stakes assessments and rewards and sanctions work best when they are one part of a larger, complex system.

Are your improvement efforts driven by building capacity or accountability? *(Circle one.)*

Capacity building Accountability

What evidence do you have to support your assessment?

What would it look like in your system if you focused more on building capacity?

What steps can you take to move in this direction?

Who are the stakeholders and decision makers who focus solely on accountability measures, and how can you communicate the benefits of building capacity to reach the system's goals?

EMPOWERMENT

Social capital vs. human capital

Social capital refers to the knowledge and resources that accumulate through relationships. Human capital is an individual's knowledge and abilities. Investing in social capital first empowers people to exponentially boost the growth of their human capital.

Are your improvement efforts primarily focused on developing social capital or human capital? *(Circle one.)*

Social capital Human capital

What evidence do you have to support your assessment?

What would it look like in your system if you developed more social capital?

What types of individual growth in your staff or team could be improved by developing more social capital?

How can you help your staff or team develop more social capital?

Adapted from Fullan, M. (2011). *Choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform.* Melbourne, Australia: The Centre for Strategic Education.

SUPPORT

Pedagogy vs. technology

Good pedagogy means better learning. Technology's role should be as a tool to support good pedagogy. Avoid the temptation to use technology solely for its own sake.

Are your improvement efforts driven by pedagogy or technology? *(Circle one.)*

Pedagogy Technology

What evidence do you have to support your assessment?

What would it look like in your system if educators were more driven by pedagogy?

How can you help your staff or teams develop more social capital via interactions, collaborations, or professional networks?

How can you refocus your use of technology to better support good pedagogy?

IMPLEMENTATION

Systemic vs. fragmented

Making systemic changes requires a comprehensive approach that addresses all levels of staff at critical points in time and stages of development. Systemic change is more effective and sustainable than a collection of change efforts that address similar goals.

Are your improvement efforts systemic or fragmented? *(Circle one.)*

Systemic Fragmented

What evidence do you have to support your assessment?

What would it look like in your system if efforts were systemic and coordinated?

What elements of your change efforts can be better coordinated at other levels or times?

Whose help would be needed to better coordinate your change efforts systemically?

Adapted from Fullan, M. (2011). *Choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform.* Melbourne, Australia: The Centre for Strategic Education.

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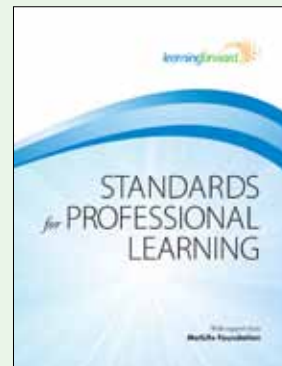
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for Professional Learning describe the characteristics of professional learning that lead to effective teaching and leadership practices and improved student results.



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