The three stories of education reform

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ABSTRACT

Fullan argues that the main enemies of large-scale education reform are overload and extreme fragmentation. He offers three stories to lend some coherence to disjointed reform efforts.

FULL TEXT

Headnote

The main enemies of large-scale reform are overload and extreme fragmentation, Mr. Fullan points out. The three stories he outlines here serve to lend coherence to an otherwise disjointed system. Those involved in reform, from the schoolhouse to the state house, can take advantage of the growing knowledge base embedded in this framework to combat these enemies of large-scale reform.

IT TAKES ABOUT three years to achieve successful change in student performance in an elementary school. Depending on size, it takes about six years to do so in a secondary school.1 While this is good news, there are two serious problems with this finding. First, these successes occur in only a small number of schools; that is, these reform efforts have not "gone to scale" and been widely reproduced. Second, and equally problematic, there is no guarantee that the initial success will last. Put in terms of the change process, there has been strong adoption and implementation, but not strong institutionalization.

The main reason for the failure of these reforms to go to scale and to endure is that we have failed to understand that both local school development and the quality of the surrounding infrastructure are critical for lasting success. I pursue this argument in terms of what I call "the three stories of reform."

The first is the "inside story" - what we know about how schools change for the better in terms of their internal dynamics. The second is the "inside-outside" story - what effective schools do as they contemplate the plethora of outside forces impinging on them. The third is the "outsidein" story - how agencies external to the school organize themselves to be effective in accomplishing large-scale reform at the school level. Taken together, these three stories provide a powerful and compelling framework for accomplishing education reform on a scale never before seen.

The Inside Story

Many of us have found that the existence of collaborative work cultures (or professional teaming communities) makes a difference in how well students do in school. Until recently, however, we did not know very clearly how these cultures operate to produce such effects. Thanks to Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage and their colleagues Karen Louis and Sharon Kruse, we now have a much better idea of what is going on inside the black box of collaborative schools.' I call this the inside story.

Newmann and Wehlage and their colleagues found that some schools did disproportionately well in affecting the performance of students. The essence of their finding is that the more successful schools had teachers and administrators who 1) formed a professional learning community, 2) focused on student work (through assessment), and 3) changed their instructional practice accordingly to get better results. They did all of this on a continuing basis.

What's new about this finding is that it both unlocks the black box of collaboralion and reveals a new role for student assessment. In What's Worth Fighting For Out There? Andy Hargreaves and I concluded that teachers must "become more assessment literate."3 This inside story makes this role clear. By assessment literacy internal to the school, we mean two things: 1) the ability of teachers, individually and together, to interpret achievement data on student performance; and 2) teachers' equally important ability to develop action plans to alter instruction and other factors in order to improve student learning.

Put another way, even if there were no external pressure for accountability, teachers and principals would need to become assessment literate in order to be successful. In collaborative schools, pedagogy and assessment feed on each other, through the interaction of teachers, to produce better results.

The clarity of this finding is significant, but one fundamental problem remains. The researchers who reported these results examined schools - whether collaborative or noncollaborative - once they were "up and running." We know nothing about how these particular schools got that way, let alone how to go about producing more of them. The particular pathways to collaboration in new situations remain obscure. Indeed, Hargreaves and I argue that, even if you knew how particular schools became collaborative, you could never tell precisely how you should go about it in your own school. There is no magic bullet; research can give us promising lines of thinking but never a complete answer. To some extent, each group must build its own model and develop local ownership through its own process.

As local groups draw on the inside story, there is an additional distinction that can be quite helpful, namely the difference between "restructuring" and "reculturing." Restructuring is just what it seems to be: changes in the structure, roles, and related formal elements of the organization. The requirement that each school should have a site-based team or a local school council is an example of restructuring. If we know anything about restructuring, it is that 1) it is relatively easier to do than reculturing (i.e., restructuring can be legislated) and 2) by itself it makes no difference in the quality of teaching and learning.

What does make a difference is reculturing: the process of developing professional learning communities in the school. Reculturing involves going from a situation of limited attention to assessment and pedagogy to a situation in which teachers and others routinely focus on these matters and make associated improvements. Structures can block or facilitate this process, but the development of a professional community must become the key driver of improvement. When this happens, deeper changes in both culture and structure can be accomplished.

In short, the inside story is that there is no substitute for internal school development. We have an increasingly clear idea about what is needed, but we don't know how to do it on a wide scale. The other two stories help in this regard.

The Inside-Out Story

While the inside story says that schools would be well advised to focus on reculturing, the inside-out story says that they cannot do it alone. Hargreaves and I have made the case that the external context of schools has changed dramatically over the past five years. The wAs of the school have become more permeable and transparent. Teachers and principals now operate under a microscope in a way that they have never had to do before. This new environment is complex, turbulent, contradictory, relentless, uncertain, and unpredictable. At the same time, it has increased the demands for better performance and greater accountability. In light of this new reality, teachers and principals must reframe their roles and shift their orientations to the outside.

In other words, the "out there" has now moved "in here:' Forces that previously were outside are now in teachers' faces every day. The first lesson of the inside-out story is counterintuitive: most outside forces that have moved inside threaten schools in some way, but they are also necessary for success. In order to turn disturbing forces to one's advantage, it is necessary to develop the counterintuitive mindset of "moving toward the danger."4

There are at least five powerful external forces that schools must contend with and turn to their advantage: *parents and community, *technology, *corporate connections, *government policy, and *the wider teaching profession.

When parents, the community, the teachers, and the students share a rapport, learning occurs. The problem is

what to do when such a rapport does not exist. In Patrick Dolan's words, schoolpeople have to involve parents in as many activities as possible and "work through the discomfort of each other's presence:'S Effective schools use their internal collaborative strength to seek out relationships with the community. They see parents more as part of the solution than as part of the problem. They pursue programs and activities that are based on two-way capacity building in order to mobilize the resources of both the community and the school in the service of learning.6

Technology is ubiquitous; the issue is how to contend with it. In What's Worth Fighting For Out There? Hargreaves and I concluded that the more powerful technology becomes, the more indispensable good teachers are. Technology generates a glut of information, but it has no particular pedagogical wisdom - especially regarding new breakthroughs in cognitive science about how learners must construct their own meaning for deep understanding to occur. This means that teachers must become experts in pedagogical design. It also means that teachers must use the power of technology, both in the classroom and in sharing with other teachers what they are learning.

Corporate partnerships are on the rise. If schools are to hold their own in this new arena, they must know what they are doing. Getting out there means developing the criteria and confidence to form productive alliances. Those who work in internally collaborative schools are less vulnerable and so more open to forming outside relationships.

Government policy has also become increasingly demanding. Policy on accountability and assessment is a good case in point. Assessment literacy, which I referred to above, has an inside-out dimension. To put it directly, teachers must become experts about the external standards that are now inside the school. On the political side, they must move toward the danger by entering the fray and by participating in the debate about the uses and misuses of achievement results. They must also take advantage of external standards to help inform what they are doing. It turns out that collaborative schools are active and critical consumers of external standards.7 They use standards to clarify, integrate, and raise their own expectations, and they want to know how well they are doing so that they can celebrate their successes or work to get better.

Finally, the current preoccupation with developing the teaching force brings another set of external forces into the schools. School improvement will never occur on a wide scale until the majority of teachers become contributors to and beneficiaries of the professional learning community. Again, effective schools see themselves as part and parcel of this wider movement. Of course, they create conditions for continuous learning for their own members. But they do more than this. They engage in partnerships with local universities or become members of other reform networks. They see themselves as much in the business of teacher education as in the business of school improvement. They have explicit criteria for hiring, they pay attention to induction, they support learning opportunities for their members, they look for reform-oriented union leadership, they provide a laboratory for student teachers, and so on. In short, effective schools take advantage of new developments in the teaching profession, but they also give as much as they get through active participation in helping to reshape the profession as a whole.

To summarize the critical importance of the inside-out story, schools need the outside to get the job done. These external forces, however, do not come in helpful packages; they are an amalgam of complex and uncoordinated phenomena. The work of the school is to figure out how to make its relationship with them a productive one.

What does the outside look like to schools? Essentially, it is a sea of excessive, inconsistent, relentless demands. Policies are replaced by new ones before they have had a chance to be fully implemented. One policy works at cross-purposes with another one. Above all, the demands of various policies are disjointed. Fragmentation, overload, and incoherence appear to be the natural order.

One key to understanding the insideout story is the realization that collaborative schools do not take on the greatest number of innovations; they do not engage in the greatest number of staff development days. Rather, they are selective: they select and integrate innovations; they constantly work on connectedness; they carefully choose staff development, usually in groups of two or more; and they work on applying what they learn.8

In other words, the ultimate effect of schools that get their act together inside and that participate outside is that

they "attack incoherence:' They deal with the Outside, partly to take on negative forces, partly to ferret out resources (some of which might be negative forces converted into supportive ones), and partly to learn from the outside. In a nutshell, the inside-out story is one of the mobilization of resources and the making of coherence.

The Outside-In Story

If you are on the outside and the first two stories are not happening the way they are supposed to, what can you do? Here is where the story gets complex. We know a great deal about individual school success; we know far less about school system success - how large numbers of schools in the same system can improve. As we try for large-scale reform, as we have been doing over the past few years, we are beginning to understand more clearly the elements of this third story. Two excellent studies of reform at the district level are those by Richard Elmore and Deanna Burney and by Anthony Bryk and his colleagues.11

When you think of the "outside," you can refer to school districts, whole states, or sets of intermediate agencies in between. In this article, I map out the main conceptual components of the outside system, but I do not provide an analysis of different levels. (I do this in Change Forces: The Sequel, where I also address the complexities of transferability of innovations.") The key concept for the outside is the "external reform infrastructure." What kind of infrastructure would best produce scores of inside and inside-out stories of the kinds described above?

Bryk and his colleagues identified four main elements of the external reform infrastructure of large districts: policies focusing on decentralization, local capacity building, rigorous external accountability, and stimulation of innovation.

The first step is to realize that the goal is to help schools function as described in the first two stories above. Clearly, you can't make schools operate this way, but you can conclude that there is no chance whatsoever of large-scale reform without some movement in these directions, Thus the first element is to maintain and develop decentralization policies. This would involve retaining (or strengthening) a school's site-based emphasis and reversing policies that stand in the way of school-focused reform. Henry Healey and Joseph de Stefano call this "clearing policy space" and "filling policy space" with new policies that are more appropriate to local development.12

While the first of Bryk's elements says to trust decentralization, the other three, in effect, say "but only to a point." We have known for some time that decentralization per se does not produce large-scale change (or much small-scale change for that matter). The trick is not to abandon it but to strengthen it.

The second element, local capacity building, means just what it says. Here the investment is in policies, training, professional development, ongoing support, and so on in order to develop the capacity of schools, communities, and districts to operate in the manner outlined in stories one and two. Capacity-building activities include such things as providing training for school teams and local school councils, redesigning initial teacher education, and adopting the panoply of new activities that will be needed to prepare teachers, principals, parents, and others to function as members of professional learning communities inside and outside the school.

The third element, a rigorous external accountability system, must be built into the infrastructure. We have already seen that schools do best when they pay close attention to standards and performance. The external accountability system must generate data and procedures that make this focus more likely and more thorough. However, such a system must be primarily (not exclusively) based on a philosophy of capacity building, i.e., a philosophy of using "assessment for learning" and otherwise enabling educators to become more assessment literate. No formal external accountability system can have an impact in the long run unless it has a capacity-building philosophy. While this is the primary goal, the external accountability system must also have the responsibility of intervening in persistently failing schools. Balancing accountability support and accountability intervention is a tough call, but this is precisely how sophisticated the external infrastructure must become.

The fourth element involves the stimulation of innovation. Ideas are important; scientific breakthroughs about learning are on the rise; innovations are being attempted around the world. Thus stimulating innovation must be a strong feature of the infrastructure. Investments must be made in research, development, innovative networks, and so on, so that the marketplace of educational ideas is constantly being mined. In fact, the existing system is quite

strong in this respect. The goal is to maintain and enhance investments in innovation as part of the broad infrastructure.

The Three Stories in Concert

The inside/out reciprocity that I have described here provides a powerful and useful metaphor for the top-down/bottom-up combinations that are required for school reform. The three stories framework is indeed compelling. Sustained change is not possible in the absence of a strong connection across the three stories. Internal school development is a core requirement, but such change cannot occur unless the school is actively connecting to the outside. Schools that do develop internally and do link to the outside are still not self-sufficient. It is possible for these schools to develop for a while on their own, but, in order for their development to be sustained, they must be both challenged and nurtured by an external infrastructure.

What happens as the three stories coalesce is that there is a fusion of three powerful forces - the spiritual, the political, and the intellectual. The spiritual dimension has to do with the purpose and meaning of reform. Indeed, the moral purpose of reform is to make a difference in the lives of students. I have argued elsewhere that concern for finding spiritual meaning in reform is on the rise.13 The purposeful interactions that occur within and across learning communities serve to mobilize moral commitments and energies. Second, such mobilization is power, so that the political capacity to overcome obstacles and to persist despite setbacks is also enhanced. Third, good ideas in the marketplacehitherto not noticed or not implemented - become more accessible as schools and school systems increase their capacity to find out about, select, integrate, and use new ideas effectively.

Recently I have been using the following formula to describe school change: E = MCA^sup 2^ - where E refers to the rate of efficacy of the system, M refers to the motivation for reform (will, purpose, commitment), C refers to the capacity for reform (skills, know-how, available resources), and Az refers to assistance times accountability. When the three stories of reform work together, they activate this change formula. Thus greater energy for reform is generated in a system of integrated pressure and support in which capacity and accountability are both increased.

The main enemies of large-scale reform are overload and extreme fragmentation. The three stories I've outlined here essentially serve to lend coherence to an otherwise disjointed system. All those involved in reform, from the schoolhouse to the state house, can take advantage of the growing knowledge base embedded in this framework to combat these enemies of largescale reform. The prospects for reform on a large scale have never been better - or more needed. But it will take the fusion of spiritual, political, and intellectual energies to transform that reform into a reality.

Footnote

1. Michael Fullan, "The Return of Large-Scale Reform," Journal of Educational Change, vol. 1, 2000, pp. 1-23.
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3. Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan, What's Worth Fighting For Out There? (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).
4. Ibid.

Footnote

5. W, Patrick Dolan, Restructuring Our Schools (Kansas City, Mo.: Systems &Organization, 1994), p. 60.
6. Joyce Epstein, "School/Family/Community Partnerships," Phi Delta Kappan, June 1995, pp. 70112.
7. Newmann and Wehlage, op. cit.
8. Anthony Bryk et al., Charting Chicago School Reform (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998).
9. [bid.

Footnote

10. Richard Elmore and Deanna Burney, "Investing in Teacher Learning," in Linda Darling-Hammond and Gary Sykes, eds., Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), pp. 263-91; and Bryk et al., op. cit.

11. Michael Fullan, Change Forces: The Sequel (London: Falmer Press, 1999).
12. F. Henry Healey and Joseph De Stefano, Education Reform Support: A Framework for Scaling Up School Reform (Washington, D.C.: Abel 2 Clearinghouse for Basic Education, 1997).
13. Ibid. K

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