# Leadership and Capacity Building: Facilitating Change through Tri-level Partnerships

**Eleoussa Polyzoi, Kathy Collis, Michael Babb**

## Abstract

In 2008, the Ministry of Education in Manitoba, Canada approved a $1.8 million grant for a major three-year pilot project entitled the Student Success Initiative (SSI) designed to support schools facing barriers to success. Six schools with lower-than-average graduation rates in Manitoba from urban, rural, and northern communities were invited to participate. This initiative is part of Manitoba's "All Aboard Poverty Reduction Strategy" whose aim is to improve student success in schools. In 2009, Fullan, Cuttress, and Kilcher identified eight drivers that are essential to promoting effective and sustainable educational innovation: (1) engaging people's moral purpose, (2) building capacity, (3) understanding the change process, (4) developing cultures for learning, (5) establishing cultures of evaluation, (6) focusing on leadership for change, (7) fostering coherence making, and (8) cultivating tri-level development. In this paper, Manitoba's SSI project serves as a reflection point for exploring Fullan et al.'s framework. It is used to inform the discussion around how government, university, and school division partnerships can enable and extend each of the drivers identified. We hope to shed some light on what has worked within the SSI project through tri-level collaboration and how this model can be used to further promote educational change and enhance leadership and capacity building for other schools.

## Scope and Objectives

In 2008, Manitoba Education approved a $1.8 million grant for a major three-year pilot project entitled the *Student Success Initiative (SSI)* designed to support schools facing barriers to success. Manitoba Education is the official department name for the Ministry of Education in Manitoba, Canada that is responsible for kindergarten-to-grade-12 education in public and funded independent schools in the province. Six schools with lower-than-average graduation rates in Manitoba from urban, rural, and northern communities were invited to participate. This initiative is part of Manitoba's "All Aboard Poverty Reduction Strategy" whose goal is to improve student success in schools. More specifically, the SSI program was designed to: provide a framework for working in high poverty contexts, identify ways to help schools systemically identify students at risk of dropping out, develop essential strategies to support students academically and socially, and provide additional personnel to support the implementation of this project.

The SSI project, currently in its third year, provides professional and financial assistance for an SSI teacher/leader in each target school. The SSI teacher/leader facilitates a team of teachers, counsellors, and administrators in a weekly review of the progress of at-risk students who have been identified through a data tracking process called the Early Warning System (EWS). The EWS flags student absences of 10% or more in the first 20 days of a semester and identifies students who have failed either a core Math or a core English Language Arts course, or two or more other courses in a semester. As well, the EWS tags students with two or more suspensions over the year and students who have received an average grade of 55% or less in a semester. Specific interventions, e.g., credit recovery (honouring students' previous course attempts and covering only gaps in content upon their return to school), tutoring, extra class time, transition support (from middle to high school or from high school to the work force), and socio-emotional support through counselling, where needed—are all provided to promote student success. There is already evidence of the benefits of the SSI project at

the participating schools: greater student engagement (Dunleavy & Milton, 2008), increased credit acquisition rates, and higher numbers of graduates.

A unique aspect of the SSI project is the tri-level partnership among government, universities, and school divisions. This partnership supports a collaborative project leadership model, facilitates multiple support paths to project schools, and recognizes the distinctive assistive capacities of the three different partners. The co-authors of this article have all been involved with this project and have served in the roles of researcher-in-residence, consultative support, and local project leader within the schools. *Eleoussa Polyzoi* is the researcher-in-residence, providing guidance on research design, as well as on collection, analysis and interpretation of data. *Kathy Collis* is the founding Director of the Winnipeg School Division's Professional Learning and Leadership Centre for inner-city teachers and school leaders, providing guidance and encouraging reflective capacity and agency among teachers and teacher leaders working on the project. *Michael Babb* is the Principal and school leader of the largest SSI participating school in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The SSI project serves as a reflection point for exploring how the framework, which identifies key drivers influencing change and innovation developed by Fullan, Cuttress, and Kilcher (2009), can be applied to Canadian schools (see Figure 1). This model is used to frame the discussion around how government, university, and school division partnerships can enable and extend each of the drivers identified. We hope to illuminate what has worked within the SSI model through tri-level collaboration and discuss how this model can be used to further promote educational change and enhance capacity building for other schools.
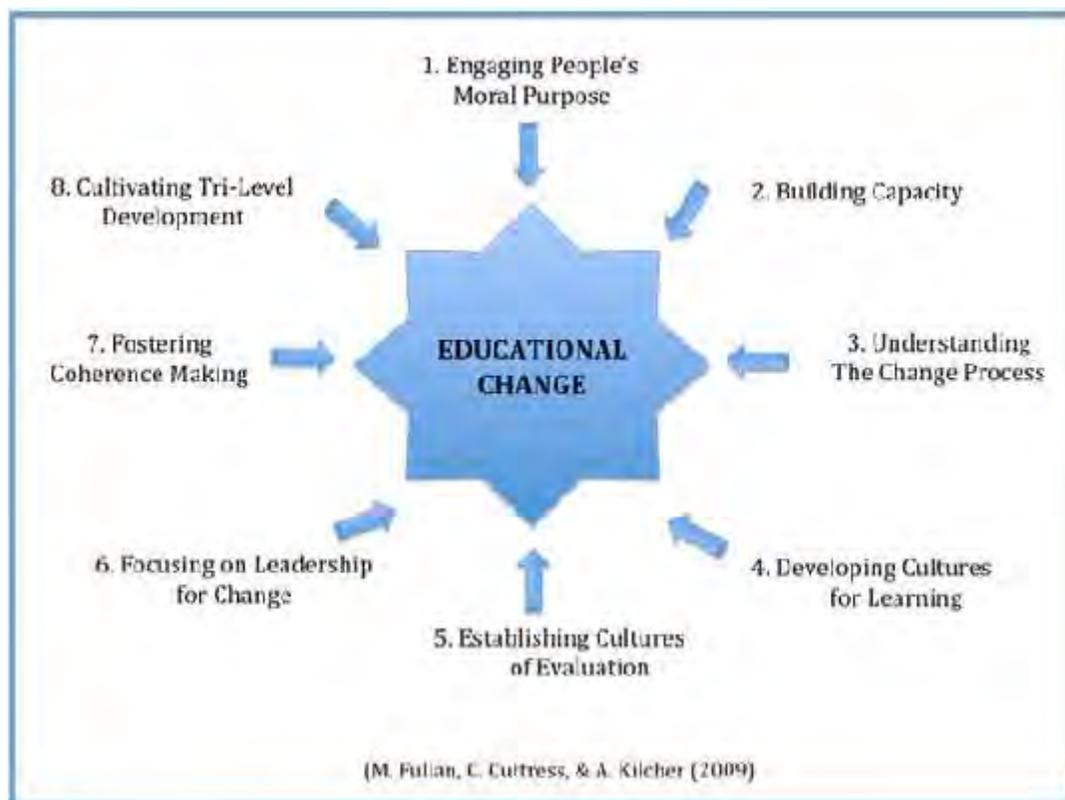


**Figure 1**: Eight Forces for Leaders of Change.

Three central questions were asked of each co-author in preparation for this paper: (1) How has the tri-level partnership been relevant for your work in affecting educational change for the SSI project? (2) What challenges have you experienced within this model? (3) What key lessons have you learned about tri-level partnerships in relation to Fullan et al.'s model? Responses are integrated in the analysis that follows.

# An Examination of Leadership and Capacity Building Through the Lens of Fullan's Framework

Fullan et al., in *The Challenge of Change* (2009), identify eight drivers that are essential to promoting effective and sustainable educational innovation: (1) engaging people's moral purpose, (2) building capacity, (3) understanding the change process, (4) developing cultures for learning, (5) establishing cultures of evaluation, (6) focusing on leadership for change, (7) fostering coherence making, and (8) cultivating tri-level development. The Student Success Initiative Project in Manitoba provides a unique opportunity to examine how Fullan's drivers illuminate the influencing power of tri-level partnerships.

## Driver #1: Engaging People's Moral Purpose:

The essence of any successful change leader is to fuel the energy and passion in others through action (Fullan, 2001). Moral purpose is an all encompassing construct that involves both ends and means. A critical end in education is to make a difference in the lives of students. The means to accomplish this end are equally important. Leading with integrity, fairness, and genuine relationship building is critical. Lewin and Regine (2000) refer to moral purpose as the "soul at work" both individually and collectively. In education, moral purpose involves being committed to the innovation— bridging the achievement gap between students who are disadvantaged and those who are not. Moral purpose is centre stage; the remaining seven drivers are vehicles for its achievement. When developing tri-level partnerships, the question becomes "**How do you build a collaborative moral purpose?**"

Sharing stories and experiences and finding common ground were critical to building a collaborative moral purpose for the SSI project, particularly with partners around the table whose backgrounds were so diverse. The importance of establishing a process for genuine discussion and sharing of experiences, thereby giving voice to each participant's unique "learning journey," cannot be underestimated. Told and retold from the perspective of the six different schools involved in the change process, these personal narratives, over time, contributed to the creation of common purpose, engagement, and commitment. As the conversations developed, a critical mass was able to achieve a breakthrough and gain momentum and energy to move into new cycles of learning (Fullan, 2005, p. 52; Rogers, 1995).

Within the SSI project, a variety of conceptual schemas were initially used to help align partners' moral purpose and vision. One school division shared the "Whole Child Philosophy" that resonated with the project partners. This philosophy outlines the belief that students need to be engaged, supported, challenged, healthy, and safe. It helped project leaders develop collaborative language surrounding what it means to support, inspire, and engage students. Understanding where students come from while truly honouring what they can become struck a chord with all of the partners. It helped participants cluster their understandings and interventions around specific common themes that could be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. School administrators also recognized the importance of respecting individual teacher initiatives and building upon existing staff talents rather than insisting on a complete program change.

## Driver #2: Building Capacity

Building capacity entails developing "policies, strategies, resources, and actions designed to increase people's collective power to move the system forward" (Fullan et al., 2009, p. 10). It also involves a new, shared identity and desire to work collaboratively for change. Building group capacity must be an ongoing process, but is not always easy because it requires that people work together in novel ways. This is why professional development at the start of an initiative is usually not enough to successfully carry the change initiative through. Capacity building must be extensive, responsive, and sustained. When developing tri-level partnerships, the question becomes "**How do you develop opportunities for synergistic capacity building among the partners?**"

Manitoba is home to a number of academic institutions, educational non-profit organizations, and universities. Accessing resources external to the Ministry extends the capacity of Manitoba Education to undertake such projects. Matching consultant expertise

with the project goals was key to the project's success.

Within the SSI, the Universities of Winnipeg and Brandon provided support through a "researcher-in-residence" model of service delivery. The researchers-in-residence, who were university professors with extensive research experience: (a) regularly visited participating schools to observe their programs, suggested directions for evaluation, and provided guidance as the project evolved; (b) recommended ways to integrate both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection, analysis, and interpretation to more firmly ground the schools' definitions of success; (c) emphasized the importance of linking data to the project goals as well as triangulating the data to obtain multiple perspectives on outcomes; (d) provided various resources (books, journal articles, reports) to the school team on a number of relevant topics; (e) helped draft the mid-term and final reports submitted to the Minister of Education; and (f) hosted meetings of the SSI team on the university campus.

Another central aspect of the SSI project was the ongoing support provided by the Winnipeg School Division's Professional Learning and Leadership Centre (PLLC). This institution, which provides professional development for emerging teacher leaders and administrators in one of the largest school divisions in the province, extended their mission to provide learning support for all partners and participants on the SSI project. During the all-day large SSI team meetings held once every three months, the PLLC generously shared critical information, helped preserve the focus on collective leadership, encouraged confidence and expertise, and facilitated group learning. The opportunity to explore educational issues, review resources relevant to the SSI project, and regularly meet and interact with other educational leaders (consultants, researchers-in-residence, and local project leaders within the schools) created trust in the change process, built a collective sense of purpose, and stimulated a genuine desire to see all students at the partner schools succeed. As the project's focus and processes became clearer, the learning cohorts at each of the schools began to take increasing ownership of the SSI vision. The PLLC effectively championed risk-taking and supported a climate that leaned into change rather than repelling it—in essence, appreciating

the differences among the six schools, embracing resistance when it arose, and learning from it.

### Driver #3: Understanding the Change Process

Understanding the change process is also critical to the success of any school initiative. Poor understanding negatively affects all the other drivers and increases the likelihood of failure. "Making change work requires the energy, ideas, commitment and ownership" of all stakeholders (Fullan, 2009, p. 11). However, understanding the complexity of the process of change is not always easy. Leaders sometimes resort to dictating the purpose and laying out the action plan for change because it seems easier, but this approach circumvents the ownership-building process critical to success. When developing tri-level partnerships, the question becomes "**How do you build common understandings around facilitating change?**"

While working in silos may allow individuals or groups to continue what they are doing with little need to move outside their comfort zone, it does not effectively move the collective change process forward. The complexity of the SSI project, from the basic logistics of implementation to the dynamics of re-culturing an entire school, was, at times, daunting for the local SSI teams. Attempts to initiate change were often met with systemic school barriers such as chronic student absenteeism, low student literacy rates, and poor parental involvement.

In cases like this, one might be tempted to gravitate to regressive change "archetypes" because they appear simpler and, therefore, more seductive. However, real change is neither static nor linear but complex and dynamic (Perkins, 2003, cited in Fullan, 2005, pp. 24, 47, 99-100; see also Fullan, 2006). Understanding the change process at a deeper level allowed the SSI partners to help one another and appreciate that the rate and pace of change may vary in different schools and for different reasons.

Fullan adds that, when dealing with change that is complex and non-linear, there is a paradoxical need for "slow knowing," (Fullan, 2001, p. 123). Claxton refers to this as "cultivating the ability to wait—to remain attentive in the face of incomprehension." (1997, p. 174). Change that is slow and "grown" is more successful than change that is ill conceived, rapid, and imposed. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009, p. 37) indicate that "building from

the bottom and steering from the top" is the best approach. School leaders at each of the SSI sites appreciated the wisdom of these words.

### Driver #4: Developing Cultures for Learning

This driver involves promoting the sharing of knowledge and strategies among the change agents that nurture collective commitment to the innovation. Fullan (2005) also emphasizes the importance of "lateral capacity building" (where schools learn from each other within a given school division, or province, or even nation), which serves to extend the pool of ideas, and augment the collective identity of schools involved in similar innovations. Fullan (2009) cautions, "Good policies and ideas take off in learning cultures, but they go nowhere in cultures of isolation" (p. 13). When developing tri-level partnerships, the question becomes "**How do you cultivate a shared learning culture?"**

It is not unusual for pilot programs to be compilations of projects that are successful elsewhere. Our work at the Ministry of Education drew inspiration from successes elsewhere in Canada and the United States. For example, in the first year of the SSI project, all six SSI school teams in Manitoba travelled to Ontario to visit a model school, which served as inspiration for the Manitoba principals whose schools piloted the SSI project. Developing a model, partnerships, and procedures that work within our unique Manitoban context is always a complicated process involving ongoing changes, mid-course redirections, continuous program evaluation, and feedback from partners. The challenge of evolving and making our work more sophisticated and timely alludes to Fullan et al.'s tri-level partnership driver. The partnerships that have developed over the past three years of the SSI project have alleviated many of the challenges and frustrations typical to this process.

It is important to recognize that teachers, as learners, are at the centre of educational change. An active learning culture allows for personal transformation and responsive teaching. The SSI project provided teachers and all local SSI teams with the opportunity to study, learn, explore, and collectively share their successes and failures. While remaining true to the intent of the SSI project, the learning cohorts at each school were able to adjust and redefine their

projects to better meet the needs of the students and for teacher learning to be enhanced. The role of the PLLC as a *key* partner in supporting the school teams in their learning and reflections cannot be underestimated. Mobilizing knowledge through frequent group sessions and reflective conversations served to increase local school ownership for capacity enhancement and action.

### Driver #5: Establishing Cultures of Evaluation

A companion piece to developing a culture of learning is establishing a culture of evaluation. This is essential to deepening the meaning of what is learned. Investing in ongoing school assessment for learning, identifying promising ideas worthy of pursuit, dropping weaker ideas that lead nowhere, engaging in school-based self-evaluation, and facing the hard facts when it comes to accountability—all permit educators to use critical information to develop action plans and make necessary school improvements (Fullan, 2009). Developing analytical capacity and making strategic use of results is a useful skill to have. Technology can enhance a school's ability to store and analyze student achievement data over time in order to examine trends, generate solutions to emergent problems, and design appropriate strategies. When developing tri-level partnerships, the question becomes "**How do you build a culture of assessment and evaluation?**

This question raises the need for common data collection practices across school divisions. Currently, within Manitoba, there is no common software for capturing student records, and this complicates how data are collected regarding attendance, credits, suspensions, graduation rates, and other details related to student success. Consequently, for the SSI project participants, the use and sharing of data were cumbersome. However, the discussion around factors that contribute to student success and the clarification of what data to collect and for what purpose was beneficial in building a better understanding of what insights data may provide. One of the major strengths of the tri-level partnership was in the collection, management, analysis, and interpretation of the data at each of the target schools.

It is worth noting that the how and why of assessment and evaluation may not always be clear to individuals; thus, one often hears

conversations that are about "satisfying a mandated request" or responses that amount to more of a "flight or fight" response. However, reflection and data collection are fundamental to self-examination and school improvement. Admittedly, the SSI schools were not initially well prepared for this task. This is where expertise from the universities, province, and school districts helped teachers to look more critically at existing conditions and plan more strategically for the future. We are just now, as a system, becoming more comfortable with educational change because an assessment and evaluation "literacy" is just beginning to develop in Manitoba.

### Driver #6: Focusing on Leadership for Change

The sixth driver of change involves knowing what kind of leadership is best to move the change initiative forward in a school. Principals who are great leaders not only improve student achievement but also develop the next generation of leaders who take up the cause and continue to push it further (Fullan, 2009). Sharing leadership with others yields higher student achievement. When developing tri-level partnerships, the question becomes "**What is the character of collective leadership and how does this differ from individual leadership that is needed for change?**"

The culture of change is typically full of anxiety, stress, and uncertainty. When executives are arrogant, inflexible, and resist teamwork, they fail (Goleman, 2000). Effective leaders show a combination of intellectual brilliance *and* emotional intelligence (Fullan, 2001, p. 71). Goleman (1998) identifies five aspects for emotional competence that help leaders succeed: (1) self-awareness (having a deep understanding of one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives; people with strong self-awareness are honest with themselves and recognize how their feelings affect others); (2) self-regulation (managing one's own impulses and having the inclination to suspend judgment and to think before acting; (3) motivation (a strong drive to achieve, passion for the work, optimism even in the face of failure); (4) empathy (awareness of other's feelings); and (5) social skills (the ability to inspire and influence others, team work, and collaboration). In addition, great leaders are characterized by humility (Collins, 2001). Rather than focusing on their own success, they nurture

it in others to ensure sustainability. Leadership is critical for enhancing the decision-making capabilities of others in the organization.

The character of collective or distributive leadership, however, is different from individual leadership. While it is important that leaders within a partnership have the characteristics of what Goleman refers to as emotional intelligence, additional collective leadership capacities are needed. Sustainable change requires leadership that builds the capacity of the entire school staff, and creates ownership of the ideas and values within the project as a whole. When a principal has knowledge and understanding of systemic change and supports and empowers the staff in that change, the teachers also become empowered and confident to affect change. When people work together in such a way that they pool their initiative and expertise, the outcome is a product or synergy which is greater than the sum of their individual actions. The learning environment of the school is too important to be left to the initiative of one person, the principal.

### Driver #7: Fostering Coherence Making

The penultimate driver identified by Fullan et al. (2009) is fostering coherence making. Innovation that is too overwhelming or implemented in a piece-meal fashion is often compromised. Creating coherence involves providing ongoing clarity about how all parts of the innovation fit together. This driver involves cultivating capacity so that a culture of learning can generate coherence from the bottom up. When developing tri-level partnerships, the question becomes "**How do you foster coherence-making with multiple perspectives and political priorities?**"

Coherence-making is often the role of an individual working between and among levels in a system. How does one aspect of the work or multiple projects on different school campuses connect with one another? It is the role of the staff development consultant to have conversations with staff to help them "connect the dots," to see similarities in school initiatives or new mandates. Their role is also to help link new knowledge with prior knowledge so that the project is seen as a doable rather than insurmountable task. The Project Leader and Principal Education Consultant for the SSI project, the Director of the PLLC, and the researchers-in-residence helped staff see the

benefits of their work and feel valued and engaged. All partners on the project made every effort to create a learning environment that met the needs of their diverse learners. The bottom line was "… we all want the best for our students."

### Driver #8: Cultivating Tri-Level Development: School or Community, District, and Province

The final driver of effective change involves system transformation at multiple levels. Change involves not only individuals but also entire systems and their interrelationships: the school or community, the district, and the province. When developing tri-level partnerships, the question becomes "**What models or frameworks support this multi-system approach?**"

Collaborative leadership builds stronger projects. Working with experts (university academics, graduate students, and professional learning support personnel) external to the Ministry of Education is invaluable because it provides multiple perspectives surrounding decision-making as well as collegial and project support.

Although greater learning emerges from the varied perspectives afforded through this tri-level partnership, this learning stance represented the steepest learning curve for many of the SSI team members. The learning mindset demonstrated by the team members helped the group move forward when expectations were not clear and when a pathway for working together was not readily evident. Trust and respect were key as individuals and, by implication, their organizations, developed relationships across different sectors and school divisions.

The tri-level partnership model adopted by the SSI project flourished because additional supportive conditions were in place. The role of hierarchies within school divisions and government were minimized allowing greater agency and responsibility to be assumed by the participants at the front line and eliminating a "them versus us" way of thinking. Opportunities for knowledge sharing were maximized allowing deeper reflection that comes from professional reading and writing. The PLLC helped the SSI teams take time to focus and balance theory, practice, and action allowing the discovery of new cycles of learning and collective action that propelled the group project forward. The SSI partners recognized that teaching could only change in sustainable ways if it happened with a strong voice from within rather than being mandated exclusively from above, a truth eloquently captured in Renzulli's concept of "a rising tide lifts all ships" (2001, p. iii). Equally important was the recognition of the unique challenges faced by SSI school leaders in the rural and northern communities, including professional isolation, fewer human resources, limited ability to attract new talented staff, and higher teacher transience—all of which make innovation more difficult in the remote versus urban areas.

Finally, paramount to the collective change process was the implementation of sound evaluation methods, grounded in relevant data and strategic analyses that effectively galvanized the change leaders to action.

## Discussion: Key Lessons

The purpose of this paper is to examine ways in which tri-level partnerships can further the work of school improvement and reform. The key change drivers identified by Fullan et al. (2009) were applied to the experience of the SSI project in Manitoba, Canada as a reflection point. A number of insights emerged that may be useful to others who are contemplating system change with government, university, and school division partners within a collaborative framework.

1) Government, university, and school division partnerships can and do build a strong moral purpose and vision. However, this process takes time, effective relationship building, and a genuine desire to work together to improve student outcomes;

2) Building collective capacity is difficult and slow work. Patience, commitment, and persistence, along with accessing local resources, people, and expertise, help to shape this collaborative effort;

3) Forming collaborative understandings of the change process leads to greater success. Using common frameworks and templates, while simultaneously not over-simplifying processes and understandings, furthers engagement in school reform work. Building a sense of purpose that "we can do the work together" reinforces that effort;

4) Developing and embracing a culture of learning by both project participants and by lead partners is vital. Teams work more effectively when information is shared and successes and challenges are understood at a deeper level. Understanding the change process helps participants work with patience and persistence and not feel "bruised" when the going is slow or when one meets resistance;

5) Utilizing sound evaluation methods, grounded in relevant data and strategic analyses, helps to *operationalize* definitions of success and move the project to the next stage;

6) Distributive or shared leadership recognizes the expertise of multiple team partners and empowers the collective to engage in the change initiative rather than precariously leaving it in the hands of one leader;

7) Coherence-making of a tapestry of perspectives and political priorities entails constantly aligning and readjusting one's vision through reflective conversations. Being flexible and open to an evolving co-construction of the change project with one's partners helps maximize individual as well as group ownership and agency; and

8) Cultivating tri-level partnerships with government, school divisions, and universities to effect change brings capacity building to a new level. Collaborative learning builds stronger projects because it brings multiple perspectives to decision-making and collegial support of the project.

The Student Success Initiative in Manitoba has generated innovative strategies that have led to increased success rates for students facing additional barriers. It has had a positive impact on all participating schools. In the largest urban school, for example, graduation rates of students involved in the SSI project over the past two and one-half years, have increased eightfold, credit acquisition rates have increased by 68%, and intellectual engagement rates, as measured by the *Tell Them From Me* survey, have surpassed Canadian norms by 14%. In addition, academic supports provided through the SSI have allowed students to overcome setbacks that would have otherwise led to lost credits. Supporting students socio-emotionally has helped them keep connected to the school, making both school and life's challenges more manageable. The SSI teacher-other staff interactions have contributed to a success-oriented culture where teachers and students work together to resolve concerns and develop plans for success. The SSI has supported a wide range of courses over the project's tenure. Students have been challenged to move onto a successful track and are supported in their efforts. Many previously disengaged students have become involved in the life of the school and are more engaged in their studies. For some students, the SSI has provided a safe home base with people who believe in and encourage them to make healthy choices. The SSI has built resilience, hope, and resolve among students who were at risk of dropping out. Hopefully, SSI schools can tip the balance for these vulnerable youth so that life-long success is now within their reach.

Tri-level partnerships have been a pivotal piece of the SSI project. Partners from government, the universities, professional learning organizations, divisions, and schools suggest that the process of working closely with partners across Manitoba has been an inspirational one. Each of the drivers that Fullan et al. describe has been an important part of this collaborative process. Fullan (2001, p. 107) eloquently offers the following advice to educational leaders who are involved with change and innovation—advice that we have taken to heart. "Change is a leader's friend, but it has a split personality: its nonlinear messiness gets us into trouble. But the experience of this messiness is necessary in order to discover the hidden benefits — creative ideas and novel solutions are often generated when the status quo is disrupted." The process of working with others challenges this status quo and allows projects to support innovation in collaborative ways that yields the best results for distributive leadership and capacity building with the long-term goal of effecting successful system change.

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# About the Authors

**Eleoussa Polyzoi** is Professor of Education and Director of Developmental Studies at the University of Winnipeg. She has published extensively in the areas of risk and resilience, leadership, capacity building, and comparative education. Currently, she is involved in a large multidisciplinary project examining respiratory health, housing conditions, and school absenteeism in First Nations communities—a study funded by the Canadian government's Collaborative Health Research Projects (CHRP) and conducted by a team of researchers from the Faculties of Education, Medicine, and Engineering. She is also the recipient of the University of Winnipeg's prestigious Erica and Arnold Rogers Award for Excellence in Research and Scholarship.

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**Michael Babb** is the principal of one of the SSI participating schools located in a large urban centre in Manitoba. He has been involved in education for just under 30 years in a variety of capacities, serving as physical education/biology teacher, vice-principal, principal, and coach. He appreciates the extensive amount of time he has been able to work with young people in both curricular and co-curricular settings and is proud of the efforts that may have helped many move forward in their life's path, instilling confidence and hope along the way.