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Turnaround Leadership

by Michael Fullan

Turnaround leadership concerns the kind of leadership needed for turning around a persistently low-performing school to one that is performing acceptably as measured by student achievement according to state tests. I first treat this question in the narrow sense, i.e., as a strategy for targeting low-performing schools, and then place it in a larger context—namely, how such turnaround can be part of an overall approach to sustainable system change. The sequence I will consider moves from the school to the district to the system as a whole. My conclusion, which I state up front, is that what looks like apparent success in turning around schools is actually quite superficial and indeed illusory.

Assessing the roles of strong interventions for failing schools is quite complicated, even in the narrow sense, because the combination of intended and unintended consequences is difficult to sort out. Let's begin with England, which since 1993 has had a system of national inspections to identify schools in need of "special measures" to improve their performance. This designation results in a series of interventions to "right" the school. Overall, the results have been positive in that a turnaround has happened in the majority of cases, and increasingly the timeline for turnaround has been reduced as the interventions have become more refined.

Early experiences in England were captured in Stoll and Myers' (1998) collection of cases entitled *No Quick Fixes: Perspectives on Schools in Difficulty*. In one assessment by Stark (1998), 86 percent of 90 schools on special measures made good progress within two years, while several of the remaining ones closed, requiring students to move to other schools. Stark (1998, 35) concluded, "Public identification of unacceptable standards tends to speed, rather than delay, recovery."

Before introducing other complications, a distinction between accountability and capacity building, or what used to be called pressure and support, needs to be made. They are not entirely mutually exclusive in that some forms of accountability have elements of support, and some forms of support have elements of pressure or built-in accountability. Be that as it may, accountability involves targets, inspections, or other forms of monitoring along with action consequences. Capacity building consists of developments that increase the collective power in the school in terms of new knowledge and competencies, increased motivation to engage in improvement actions, and additional resources (time, money, and access to expertise).

When turnaround intervention combines accountability and capacity-building strategies, things usually improve (to a point, but more about that later). The factors at play according to Stark (1998) included raising expectations, a focus on improving teaching, new or enhanced leadership by principals, and external intervention. Even in cases of improvement in England, the increase often was to the acceptable level only, not higher, and more tellingly, usually did not establish the conditions for maintaining, let alone enhancing the gains.

A more complex picture was portrayed in Mintrop's (2003) in-depth study of 11 schools in two high-accountability states, Maryland and Kentucky. He first set out the hypothetical assumptions which underpin high-stakes external accountability policies that place schools on probation. Though Mintrop (2003) said that policy makers do not explicitly spell out why the labeling of schools as low performers along with threats of further penalties would be effective motivators, plausible assumptions could be:

- High-stakes accountability improves teacher motivation. When a school is publicly labeled as deficient, teachers, after going through a whole range of emotions, accept the urgency of improvement.
- High-stakes accountability positively affects organizational development. Most accountability systems hold whole schools, rather than individuals, accountable for higher performance. Through school-wide improvement, therefore, individuals overcome the label of probation.
- The eventual result is instructional change in classrooms. When teachers have the will to change and faculties begin to evaluate their schools' shortcomings, they raise their own expectations to the high demands of the system and agree on formal procedures of internal accountability, making the conditions ripe for teaching content and methods restructuring.

That's the theory! The fact was, though, many schools (Mintrop 2003, 148) improved only on the surface:

The two accountability systems largely failed to instill meaningful performance goals in educators in the studied schools on probation, and they failed even more miserably with the most active members of the profession. An incentive system that cannot appeal to the higher-performing parts of the workforce is doomed to failure. The systems insufficiently tapped into teachers' personal sense of responsibility for performance. As a result, school improvement for the majority was mainly externally

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induced and directed, prodded by administrators, instructional specialists, external consultants, staff developers, and so on whose activities were moderately fueled by a common desire among teachers to be rid of stigma and scrutiny.

The short and powerful conclusion for systems that use turnaround intervention as a main strategy for improvement is that they at least get some improvement in achievement scores (though in these cases, it is a move from poor scores to adequate ones).

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Moreover, and again in cases of apparent success, there was little increase in the internalized commitment of teachers to take responsibility for further improvement. The key to continuous improvement, according to Mintrop (2003, 156), was “motivation and commitment to stay which is strongly related to principal leadership, collegiality, and perceived skills of colleagues. But, we found these skills and talents in short supply across the studied schools.” He added (2003, 150):

Probation was not working as a tool for self-evaluation. Rather than accepting criteria and judgments of the system, teachers felt singled out as the ones who had to carry the ‘blame’ for student learning, and, in turn, externalized the causes for underperformance. Thus instead of strengthening internal accountability in the 11 schools, high-stakes accountability triggered an unproductive blame shifting: the system placing responsibility squarely on educators’ shoulders and educators, in turn, deflecting it back to society.

If leaving poorly performing schools alone is morally indefensible and, if high-stakes intervention is at best a Band-Aid® and, at worst, a further demotivator to take responsibility for improvement, what is the answer? Generally (as I attempt to outline in the next two sections), the approach with the most chance for success involves reversing the emphasis on accountability and capacity building so that capacity building is the main driver with high-stakes accountability playing a real, but smaller, and paradoxically more effective, role in the process. This means major changes in the way school districts and the states work.

The Role of the District

Leadership at the school level must be framed in terms of the district’s role. Here, the issue for turnaround leadership is what kind of leadership at the district level is needed. In turn, what does that mean for the role of school leaders and their relation to the district? The shift since 1988 has been to reintroduce the role of the district to

signify the shift from single-school, site-based management to district-wide reform, or a situation where all schools in the district are implicated simultaneously. This signifies the beginning of reconceptualizing accountability and capacity building in system terms.

District-wide reform research can be considered in two phases: 1988–1996 and 1997–2004. District 2 in New York City is a good example of the first phase. From 1988 to 1996, using accountability and capacity-building strategies, this district moved substantially ahead in literacy and numeracy both in its own right and in comparison to the other 31 districts in the larger New York system. Elmore and Burney (1999) identified the

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lessons learned, which included focusing on instruction, sharing expertise, focusing on district-wide improvement, and setting clear expectations. Intervention in low-performing schools was used selectively (intervention in inverse proportions to success). Persistently failing schools received more attention, including replacement of principals, external support, monitoring, and feedback. In this case, accountability was clearly in the service of capacity building.

In district-wide work, the delicate balance between accountability and capacity building needs to be considered. In District 2, an apparent balance existed between the two, with a clear commitment to capacity building. When District 2's superintendent went to San Diego as Chancellor of Instruction in 1996–1997, the accountability stakes were much higher. The strategy for reform there was built on District 2's experience, but had a heavier and more public element of accountability. Student gains were achieved in San Diego in the early years of the reform, but at the expense of the long-term commitment of many teachers and principals. When accountability pressures dominate, even in the presence of good support, the gains can be only short-term.

Many districts have attempted to build on the knowledge and experiences of District 2, with the leadership in these districts focusing more systematically on district-wide improvement. Fullan, Bertani, and Quinn (2004) identified 10 lessons about district-wide reform dubbed "Phase Two Learnings" (1997–2004). These lessons indicate that districts are successful when they combine the following "drivers" of reform:

- a compelling conceptualization by district leaders—envisions both the content of reform and includes a special commitment to capacity-building strategies;
- a collective moral purpose—characterizes the whole district and not just a few individuals;

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- the right bus—the structures, roles, and role relationships that represent the best arrangement for improving all schools in the district;
- capacity building—training and support for all key leaders;
- lateral capacity building—connecting schools within a district so that they learn from one another and build a shared sense of identity beyond the individual school;
- ongoing learning—districts learn as they go, including building powerful “assessment for learning” capacities that involve the use of student data for school and district improvement;
- productive conflict—some degree of conflict is expected when difficult change is attempted and, thus, is treated as an opportunity to explore differences;
- a demanding culture—care is combined with high expectations all around to address challenging goals;
- external partners—selective external groups are used to enhance internal capacity building; and
- focused financial investment—new monies are invested up front to focus on capacity development but are framed in terms of future accountability.

The combination of these ten lessons increases the chances that most schools in the district will make progress. The lessons combine high support with high challenge. Turnaround leadership in selected schools occurs, not as an isolated strategy, but within the context of a district-wide commitment to building the capacity of the district and all of its schools to move forward.

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Leadership at the school and district levels (turnaround or otherwise) is greatly affected by what the state does in the areas of accountability and capacity building. It is at this level that

radical new thinking and action are required to redress the current imbalance of high-stakes accountability over capacity-building actions.

The Role of the State

Turnaround leadership must be a real but subordinate component to an overall strategy of capacity building. This is not the case in Maryland and Kentucky where high-stakes accountability works to achieve short-term gains at the expense of demotivating educators from pursuing continuous improvement.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is even more problematic. High-stakes accountability through Annual Yearly Progress and escalating primitive measures swamps any notions

of capacity building. Popham (2004) provided a devastating critique of the NCLB Act and the multifarious damages it is leaving and will leave in its wake.

A national strategy to shift toward greater capacity building has been in place in England since 1997 after initial results plateaued. The punitive nature of the national inspection systems has been reduced, and there has been a growing presence of capacity-building strategies including leadership development, networking, lateral capacity building, initial teacher education, and school and district self-review (Fullan 2004).

In Ontario, a comprehensive strategy that places accountability in the service of high expectations and capacity building is being designed and implemented. Ambitious targets have been set for literacy and numeracy, such as a commitment to increasing the proficiency of 12-year-olds from its current average of 56 percent to

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75 percent by 2008. Investments are being made to establish a new secretariat to head the strategies of "leading" literacy and math teachers in all 4,000 elementary schools in the province, negotiating district and school plans, providing support for capacity building during implementation, and enhancing school principals' roles. Though the specific turnaround element to support the most disadvantaged schools currently is "semi-voluntary," a strong participation rate is predicted due to the established expectations, visibility, and new resources. Paradoxically, this "positive pressure" will result in greater, deeper, and a more intrinsic commitment to improvement on the part of schools and districts than any mandatory program. This is a crucial point. This strategy will yield greater results than alternative high-stakes requirements and will be surrounded by broad-based capacity building across all 72 districts and 4,000 schools.

In a pilot project involving 43 schools, the majority of schools improved in terms of student achievement over a three-year period. The key factors (Ontario Ministry of Education 2004) associated with success were:

- diagnosis and planning—use of literacy experts to identify areas for improvement and develop strategies for improvement;
- focus on literacy—the adoption of a focused and coordinated literacy block and a common framework of instructional components as a key part of each school's action plan;

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- use of student assessment and monitoring—the systematic use of assessment and monitoring tools to track student progress and assess the impact of planned strategies;
- professional development—participation of teachers and administrators in focused professional development and collective capacity building; and
- clear accountability—schools are sent a clear message that status quo is not acceptable. Schools are challenged to adopt new strategies as a basis for continued support.

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The full range of strategies has not yet been developed in this pilot project. As the size of the program is expanded, the needs of more schools will be addressed and integrated with a more comprehensive strategy. The pilot project evidenced that improvements do occur, and in a way that school staff members take pride in the results (because changes were not forced on them) and more critically increase their commitment and motivation to maintain gains and go further.

Capacity building is precise work that requires the interaction of government agencies, districts, and schools in shaping and reshaping strategies. In the United States, this is complicated by federal and state relationships. In Canada, where federal involvement is minimal, capacity building will play itself out province by province.

As we look to the future, capacity building must become a core feature of all improvement strategies, and we need to focus explicitly on the difficult issues of sustainability. According to Hargreaves and Fink (in press), existing leadership and succession is at best a random act. They identified key conditions for rethinking leadership in the context of sustainability. I (Fullan 2004) also have argued that we need leadership that in effect, represents “system thinkers in action.” We now can identify some of the core elements of sustainability. More importantly, it is clear that new conceptions and actions of leadership are the key levers for system transformations. This new leadership focuses as much on developing other leaders as it does on student learning and achievement (Fullan 2004).

Turnaround leadership must be put in perspective with and connected to comprehensive strategies that combine positive pressure (accountability) and capacity

building. The less prominent and dominant turnaround leadership is, the more effective it will be. It must be driven by an explicit commitment to moral purpose, including raising the bar and closing the gap of student learning (Fullan 2003; Fullan forthcoming). This is definitely a case where less is more!

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