

CONSIDERATIONS FOR EDUCATION REFORM IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Countries around the world refer to twenty-first century education as essential to maintaining personal and national economic advantage and draw on this discourse to advocate for and embark on educational reform. This paper examines issues around education reform, particularly in British Columbia. It argues that reformers should give careful consideration to the latest research on successful reform drivers as articulated by Michael Fullan, examples of best practices as illustrated by the province of Ontario, and heed the U.S. attempt at reform as a cautionary tale. All these factors are crucial to implementing education reform in B.C., especially in the current challenging and contentious political climate.

Introduction

For the last decade, much of the push for systemic educational reform around the world has stemmed from recognition that society's social and economic strategies have changed. As citizens are increasingly expected to undergo multiple career changes throughout their lives, governments are expecting schools to emphasize the importance of lifelong learning, to strengthen students' thinking and problem solving skills, and increase their ability to adapt to rapidly changing times. Reformers believe that transforming the structure of the education system will allow schools to better meet the needs of students for the twenty-first century. Even though most countries' central goal for systemic reform has been to raise student academic achievement, they also want schools' support in equipping students with the skills required to become strong contributors to their country's global economic competitiveness.

In British Columbia, the Ministry of Education has drawn from this global twenty-first century education rhetoric to frame the need for educational reform in the province, articulating their vision in the recently unveiled *B.C. Education Plan* (2011). For many, the twenty-first century agenda can be construed as an attempt to explicitly bridge B.C.'s school plan with neoliberal desire (Steeves, 2010). Education as it stands, the current Liberal government argues, does not fit their goals of citizenship and global commerce (Premier's Technology Council, 2010). B.C. is not alone. Other provinces in Canada are also undergoing reform using the same ideological argument, and countries including Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, China, and Singapore, refer to twenty-first century education as essential to maintaining personal and national economic advantage (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2010; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011; Whelan, 2009).

This paper examines issues around education reform in general, as well as issues particular to the present context for education reform in B.C. It argues that careful consideration of the latest research on reform as well as of examples of best practices, as illustrated by some countries' success stories as education reformers, is critical to implementing a successful education reform in B.C. This paper is divided into three main sections. The first considers general issues around education reform. The second examines some challenges for reform in B.C. The historically combative relationship between the Ministry of Education and the organization representing the teaching force, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF), provides a substantial challenge to implementing education reform. Lastly, the third section draws on Michael Fullan's (2011) drivers for educational reform to frame discussion around required conditions for successful reform in B.C. Examples from successful reform stories such as the province of Ontario, and a less successful example, the United States, are discussed.

General Issues Around Education Reform

Education reforms have been around ever since schools began (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Changing governments are always looking for ways to implement initiatives that align with their political ideology. Often, those changes are not based on reliable research evidence, which may account for the high rate of unsuccessful reform attempts to date (Levin, 2010). The growth of international comparison tools for student achievement, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, has enhanced the global level of awareness and competitiveness. Aiming to improve test results, together with the belief that education is the vehicle for economic advantage, countries around the world are diligently working to reform their education systems. Despite the dramatic increase in education reform efforts in most countries, their impact on overall levels of student academic achievement has not been as successful as anticipated (Clarke, Harris, & Reynolds, 2004). Levin (2010) argues that governments in general have not been very successful in implementing reform because they usually do what it is easier for them to control: that is, make changes through policy to the structural aspects of the system, such as finance, workforce, governance, accountability, or incentive systems. Some of those structural changes take the form of increasing school choice and competition, which tends to increase inequality within and among schools (Abernathy, 2005), decentralization, which by itself is not enough to produce significant gains, and accountability. Even though information about performance is necessary to drive improvement, it is dependent on the skill and motivation of participants. Levin (2010) writes that governments usually fail at providing conditions and support to sustain successful implementation. Systemic reform requires a significant support infrastructure with enough skilled people to provide ongoing support to all schools and districts. Also, very

important in the implementation process is the relationship of all stakeholders. This aspect will prove exceptionally difficult for B.C. because, “as it now stands, the system is fractured at its core” (Fleming, 2011, p. 104). However, the BCTF and the Ministry of Education have recently reached a tenuous agreement to postpone further contract negotiations until June 2013 (CBC, 2012). This timeframe provides for a small window of opportunity which could allow willing education stakeholders to take steps towards repairing and nurturing a relationship based on trust.

It is not possible to generate improvement in schools against the wishes of educators (Levin, 2008; OECD, 2009). Engagement needs to be the highest priority because motivated and committed people are the most important resource in successful educational reform (Levin, 2008, 2010). However, there are always multiple sides to an issue, and that is true of governments and the constraints and pressures they face. Government decisions are usually not constrained by research evidence, but rather by general public opinion and that of particularly powerful interest groups, such as business associations, parent advisory committees, trustees associations, and unions. While governments have to juggle many aspects of issues, critics are often committed to only one issue. Governments live within a climate of constant compromise and imposition as they reconcile the advice from civil servants with their political agenda. Levin (2010) suggests that policy-making in education is especially sensitive. Most citizens have had experience with the school system by virtue of having been a student and therefore have strong opinions about education. Combined with the fact that education has to do with children and the future, education is an issue that brings out many opinions and anxieties, and governments face huge political penalties and criticism for small mistakes. All these constraints are not used to excuse government from its responsibilities, but rather to provide a context for the realities of governing that need to be taken into account when building successful and collaborative relationships. In

B.C., this awareness is especially important. The need for all stakeholders to communicate and work towards developing a common vision is imperative for the province to proceed with educational reform.

Challenges Around Education Reform in B.C.

Even though school reform in B.C. is justified by the government as needed to support their vision for the province (Premier's Technology Council, 2010), the elements highlighted in B.C.'s Education Plan (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2011), especially personalization of learning, higher order thinking skills, and more involvement of family and community in students' education, are powerful and positive elements to support student development. B.C.'s Education Plan is informed by input from twenty-first educational leaders such as Ken Robinson, Michael Fullan, David Hargreaves, John Abbott, and others (georgeabbottbc, 2012). While it is laudable that B.C. has made an effort to seek the advice and expertise from these leaders to guide them in shaping the vision for reform in the province, the current government has not devoted as much energy and effort to create a climate conducive to implementing reform. B.C. will face significant challenges on its path to education reform.

Firstly, there is a major disconnection between the ambitious vision for reform that the government is putting forward and the difficult financial realities within the system. Fleming, in his 2011 book *Worlds Apart*, argues that

a disjuncture between education decision making and fiscal responsibility ... [has created a situation where boards] vigorously complain that the schools are under-resourced, that the basic education program [funding] formula used by the province ... is insufficient ... On the other, provincial authorities point to ... escalating provincial expenditures in schooling ... [combined with] the shrinkage in public school populations ... [and] little is ever resolved. (pp. 108–109)

Secondly, there is a high turnover in government's Ministry of Education personnel making it difficult to give reform the time and consistency it requires (Fleming, 2011).

Lastly, and most distressing to those of us craving positive education improvements in the province, are the strained relations between the two main stakeholders in education, the BCTF and the Ministry of Education. Fleming argues that "connections between the ministry and schools in the system are currently fewer and more tenuous than at any other time in the province's history" (p. 103). This conflict between the union and government has lasted for over 40 years, making it very difficult to embark on successfully implementing reform. BCTF executives (Clarke, 2003) bragging about being "the most effective and vocal opposition the government faces" and being government's "biggest public policy headache" does little to promote a respectful climate for collaboration. The same can be said about the malicious use of media by government, as evidenced by recent TV ads, discrediting the teaching profession and what it stands for (CTV, 2012). Fleming (2011) writes that opportunities to pursue sound educational policies are slight when the fundamental calculations remain political and confrontational on both sides. Charlie Naylor (2002), a senior researcher with BCTF, suggested replacing the traditional "shotgun" approach to the various teacher union activities with a more targeted, cohesive, and productive approach. It is about prioritizing the issues that most impact student learning and approaching these issue with a collaborative approach rather than a confrontational one. It is crucial for B.C. to work towards repairing these frayed relationships and establishing a climate of respectful collaboration before embarking on educational reform. Fullan (2011) proposes that if a system does not have a climate of respect, there is only one way to break that cycle of distrust—respect others before they have earned the right to be respected, and then build competencies and trust over time. Now, who will take the first step?

Considerations for Successful Reform in B.C.

Michael Fullan's (2011) drivers for educational reform provide an effective model to frame discussion around required conditions for successful reform in B.C. Fullan (2011) argues that whole system reform is guided by drivers, defined as policy and strategy levers that have the least and the best chance of driving successful reform. Drivers' effectiveness is measured by how well they foster the four crucial elements for whole system reform: intrinsic motivation, instructional improvement, teamwork, and allness. Fullan (2011) writes that the key to system-wide success is placing educators and students at the centre, and that policies for reform need to foster intrinsic motivation as well as skills enhancement of all participants. Much evidence for the impact of the four elements outlined by Fullan as crucial to facilitating reform is provided by PISA results (OECD, 2010) and the McKinsey report (Mourshed, Chinezi, & Barber, 2010) for top performing countries.

Fullan (2011) uses the United States as an example of a cautionary tale for countries considering educational reform. Within a climate of urgency, the United States has adopted drivers that, even though they may look like plausible solutions, end up being "silver bullets," such as accountability, promotion of the individual, technology, and fragmented strategies to improve some schools but not all. These drivers, Fullan (2011) argues, are ineffective because they alter formal attributes of the system without reaching the internal substance of reform, the day-to-day culture of school systems, which is what really propels and sustains reform. Fullan (2011) writes that these *wrong drivers* have a place in reform but that it is a mistake to lead with them, as they achieve temporary pockets of improvement, but can never establish the conditions for whole system reform. On the other hand, intrinsic motivation, instructional improvement,

teamwork, and allness are the anchors of whole system reform because they promote sustainability of the initiatives by working directly on changing the culture of school systems.

Unlike the United States, the province of Ontario, has been cited as an example of a successful professionally driven reform in the OECD report (2011), among other leading countries such as Finland and Singapore. As another province within Canada, Ontario provides a good example for British Columbia with their choice of effective drivers and of possible pitfalls to avoid. Ontario started its educational reform in 2003 within a political climate of strained relationships such as B.C. is currently experiencing. Education was deemed to be a priority and government believed that in order to move forward with a reform agenda it was imperative to build a relationship of trust with the teaching profession, school boards, and all other stakeholders in education (Levin, 2008; OECD, 2011). The government surrounded itself with experts in education and reform, and together articulated a shared vision for capacity-building system change that helped to anchor and sustain reform in the years that followed.

Accountability Versus Intrinsic Motivation and Capacity Building

The U.S. focus on accountability uses standards, assessment, rewards, and punishment as core drivers and assumes that educators will make the necessary changes to develop the skills and competencies to get better results. Fullan (2011) argues that leading with accountability is not the best way to achieve accountability. Ontario understood that most top-down initiatives were unable to achieve deep and lasting changes in practice. Instead, what was required was to build new or strengthen existing skills and to generate deeper motivation by highlighting the learning-instruction-assessment nexus that was central to driving student achievement. To that end, they downplayed the public reporting of assessment results and focused instead on

providing support and expertise to struggling schools (Levin, 2008; OECD, 2011). This vertical accountability is essential, but it needs to be sustained by horizontal accountability among peers through capacity building, engagement, and trust building. Ontario invested in teacher-generated solutions to weaknesses in achievement results. This show of trust in the competence and professionalism of the teaching force was an essential ingredient in repairing the previous rupture between the profession and the government (Levin, 2008; OECD, 2011).

Individual Quality Versus Teamwork

Teacher appraisal and feedback would seem like a good idea, justified on the principle that feedback improves performance, but Fullan (2011) argues that it will not work unless it is embedded in a school culture of learning where teachers are motivated to learn from feedback. These professional collaborative relationships are shown to significantly contribute to gains in student achievement (Leana, 2011). Better performing countries studied by the McKinsey group (Mourshed, Chinezi, & Barber, 2010) are successful because they develop the entire teaching profession, combining policies to attract and develop high quality teachers with strategies and incentives for leaders and peers to work together. If teacher quality is the main factor related to student learning, and a country or province wants whole system transformation, then all teachers must own the reform. All of the successful systems have recognized this fact. What works is the daily experience of all teachers as peers working together in a purposeful, effective way while embracing public accountability (OECD, 2011). Unlike the United States, where individual teachers and schools were rewarded by how high students scored on tests, Ontario developed a climate of collaboration, allocating funding for schools to support teachers working in teams to promote student achievement. The government modelled this approach by creating working

teams that provided support and expertise to schools (Levin, 2008; OECD, 2011), believing that improving pedagogy would bring about the desired improvement in student academic achievement.

Technology Versus Instructional Improvement

Currently technology seems to be winning the race for attention and funding over pedagogy (Bush & Wise, 2010). Technology can lead to distraction, as it is continually improving while instruction may not. Technology will be a dramatic accelerator if we can put instruction and skilled motivated teachers and students in the lead. In this way, students will motivate teachers as much as the other way around. In their promotion of technology to personalize learning for all students (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2011), the province of B.C. will benefit from considering Fullan's (2011) caution that no successful system became good using technology at the front. Instead, a focus on improving pedagogy will have a greater impact on student learning.

Fragmented Solutions Versus Allness or Systemic Solutions

Systemic strategies require and support universal, on-the-ground improvement efforts. Capacity building, group work, and deep pedagogy accelerated by technology are processes that support all schools engaging in improvement of practice. Systemic means all elements of the system are interconnected and involved day after day. Successful countries, such as Finland, believe that universal quality education is crucial to their future, and that all stakeholders must be part of the solution (OECD, 2011). These governments have come to trust and respect teachers by making provisions to ensure the quality of their preparation, the quality of their working

conditions, and in enabling teachers to work together. Unlike the United States, which implemented a fragmented solution by aiming to improve the bottom 5% performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), B.C. would do well to model itself after a systemic reform model, such as Finland's (OECD, 2011), aiming to improve learning for all students.

Systemic implementation is not “quick.” The McKinsey report (Mourshed et al., 2010) found that when using effective drivers it takes an average of six years to implement. Abbott (2011) agrees with the paradox of education reform, that it is so urgent it must not be rushed! He advocates a start-up model by setting up a “drip-feed” of ideas into whichever communities wish to be involved, and then finding several well-defined pilot areas in which there is the confidence to spearhead these changes. At the same time, faculties of education need to integrate new ideas into their programs and into supporting professional development to existing teachers. Lastly, Abbot, in agreement with Fullan (2011), states that all changes must be implemented with the moral imperative to benefit all students.

Conclusion

Researchers have argued that education reform is a complex and multi-faceted undertaking fraught with dangers and prone to failure (Fullan, 1991; Harris, 2000). While both top-down and bottom-up models of education reform have proven ineffective in sustaining a climate conducive for systemic change to occur, a combination of the two seems more promising (Fullan, 1994). There will always be tension between horizontal and vertical authority but both groups need to define their world to include the other as part of the same system. Connectivity and cohesion are constantly cultivated while recognizing that the interests of the local and central entities are in dynamic tension. The idea is to find complementary synergy while appreciating

differences. If reform comes with a tone of imposition from the top, taking the shape of an incoming tsunami wave, it is bound to cause a great deal of destruction in the process. However, if reform is gentle and collaborative and ideas are allowed to percolate and be owned, then the chances for success are greatly enhanced (Levin, 2008). There is a place and a need for a centre that holds it all together, that provides the nourishment, support, and conditions for ideas to take hold and flourish. The key for success is to respect and accept that each stakeholder has a role to play in education reform.

In order to forge ahead with education reform, British Columbia needs to reduce the current political noise surrounding public education. The use of media to promote and garner support for individual agendas only contributes to damaging the reputation and morale of the teaching profession, as well as to a loss of support for and faith in public education. There are a number of considerations for B.C. as it embarks on educational reform. Firstly, the educational reforms of the province of Ontario were not used as an example of a perfect reform, but rather as an example of a successful one. Three key elements to Ontario's success that are especially relevant to B.C. are the unrelenting effort by government to restore trust, peace, and stability before moving ahead with governance reforms (Sattler, 2012); the building of a shared vision for reform and the allocation of funding and supports to implementing that vision; and also the belief that teachers, if supported, had the expertise to problem solve around maximizing student learning. Secondly, Fullan's (2011) drivers for successful reform provide B.C. with guidance on decision making around prioritizing reform initiatives. The main agenda should focus on promoting capacity building and a collaborative culture within the profession in order to support the student learning-instruction-assessment nexus; an investment in strengthening pedagogy matched by an investment in technology to power effective strategies; and above all, a strong

commitment to the moral purpose of raising the achievement bar by implementing support systems with the objective of closing the academic achievement gap for all students.

Finally, Tyack and Cuban (1995) remind us that the likelihood of educational changes “sticking” is greatly compromised without strong sponsors who will see the reform through to its successful conclusion. B.C.’s government needs to consider what is best for the province over the long run rather than their short term political agenda. At a time of reform, education needs to be held as a priority with adequate funding allocated to support it. Restructuring reform policies that are driven primarily by economic benefits without due consideration of their social costs will significantly hinder credibility and success of reform. Instead, “education changes must be undertaken in compassionate, generous, and nurturing ways, where care for the individuals becomes a genuine core value” (Galway, 2012, p. 22).

If B.C. is truly committed to becoming a global competitor on the economic stage and a leader in twenty-first century education, as is the present government’s goal, then all education stakeholders need to put their individual agendas aside and focus instead on working together to create a shared vision that will help restore confidence and pride in the province’s public education system. Though not a road map to reform, the framework and experiences shared above can be used by all stakeholders, to not only provide reform within B.C. but model successful educational reform to those seeking the same beyond its borders.

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