

# Educational reform and school leadership in 3-D perspective

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## Introduction

Ultimately, only three things matter about educational reform:

1. Does it have **depth**: does it improve important rather than superficial aspects of students' learning and development?
2. Does it have **length** or duration: can it be sustained over long periods of time instead of fizzling out after the first flush of innovation?
3. Does it have **breadth**: can the reform be extended beyond a few schools, networks or showcase initiatives to transform education across entire systems or nations?

Successful school reform is a Picasso, not a Rembrandt. It approaches change not in one or two dimensions, but, like a cubist painter, views it from all three.

This paper examines what is important and leads to success in each of the three dimensions of educational reform. It shows how the three dimensions interact, and identifies promising change strategies that can secure progress on all of these together.

## 1. Depth: social and emotional understanding

Increasingly, educational reformers want more than improved achievement results of any kind. They want deep, powerful, high-performance learning-for-understanding that prepares young people for participation in today's knowledge or informational society.

Learning for understanding is not just a cognitive and psychological matter, though. Deep learning and teaching are also cultural and emotional processes. They entail contextualising students' learning in what they have learned before, in what other teachers are also teaching them, and in students' own cultures and lives. This deep contextualisation of learning which gets students engaged in it is a cultural, and not just a cognitive, task (Hargreaves, A, Earl, L, Moore, S & Manning, S, in press).

In addition to establishing these cultural connections, deep learning and teaching also have to create emotional engagements and bonds with and among students. These are the building blocks of empathy, tolerance and civic duty. All teaching and learning are emotional practices – either by design or neglect. Deep learning that builds emotional engagement and understanding requires strong, continuous relationships between teachers and students.

Developing learning with emotional as well as cognitive depth requires two things:

- a vision of learning standards that is social and emotional as well as cognitive
- standards that are not so content-based and measurement-driven that they reinforce a subject-centred, fragmented curriculum which undermines the basis for emotional understanding

## 2. Length: sustaining change over time

Deep teaching and learning are not only difficult to do: they are even harder to support, to sustain over time and to spread beyond a few local initiatives. Educational change agency requires more than strategies to promote change. It also needs ways of anticipating and overcoming obstacles to sustaining change over time (Stoll & Fink, 1996). The difficulties are starkly illustrated in two cases of innovative high schools in our study of change over time in eight secondary schools in Canada and the United States.

### Lord Byron High School

When Lord Byron High School opened in 1970, it was one of the most innovative secondary schools in North America. It had open architecture, interdisciplinary departments, individualised learning programmes, and differentiated staffing (with some teaching positions replaced by support staff). The school's young staff was largely hand-picked by its charismatic principal. Thousands of visitors came through the school during this time.

Most evaluations of innovative or model schools usually take snapshots only of this early phase. They rarely follow change beyond the initial years of creativity and experimentation into the next phases Byron experienced as it overextended itself in pursuing further change, then retreated in the face of external pressure (Fink 2000). By the 1990s, Byron had reverted defensively to conventional structures that made it largely indistinguishable from secondary schools around it.

The school's failure to sustain its innovative character is traceable to problems of:

- **Leadership succession**  
High-profile changes are often assigned innovative, even charismatic leaders who can draw excellent people to them, create a vision, and establish commitment and loyalty. In the words of one teacher, Byron's first headteacher was "a hard act to follow".
- **Staff recruitment and retention**  
New schools often open with hand-picked staff. They create the initial vision, form the founding culture, and come to feel special. Later staff appointments seldom had the same commitment to the school's philosophy.
- **Size**  
As Byron's pupil population got larger, the school became more bureaucratic. Divisions developed between departments, in-class and support staff, department heads and classroom teachers, and staff and administration. The small, special community gave way to micro-political bickering.
- **LEA and policy context**  
In its early days, Lord Byron received special support from the LEA. In time, though, the government tightened curriculum and organisational requirements which forced the LEA and Lord Byron to fall into line with other secondary schools.

- **Community support**

In innovative settings, professional images of a “good school” will often be at odds with the community notion of a conventional school or “real school” (Metz, 1991). A major reason for the attrition of change at Byron was its inability to resolve this good school/real school dichotomy.

## **Blue Mountain School**

Blue Mountain School has been open for five years. Established with a charismatic principal and carefully selected staff, the school has established great technological, structural and curriculum innovations compared to the standard “grammar of secondary schooling” (Tyack & Tobin, 1994).

Structurally, the school has no subject-defined departments. It has a leadership team comprised of eight process leaders rather than the customary group of subject department heads. It is fully integrated for technology, with every student having access to the internet and all staff members having laptop computers and being expected to model the use of technology to students. The school is self-consciously a learning organisation. In many ways, Blue Mountain is a model school or Beacon school of the future, inundated with visitors and featured in high-profile videos on secondary school change. Yet there are early signs that after five years, like Lord Byron, it is losing some of its lustre.

Let’s revisit and apply the challenges faced by Lord Byron to Blue Mountain.

- **Leadership succession**

Blue Mountain’s founding headteacher left after four years to solve an improvement problem elsewhere. The new leader must lead in a rapidly transformed, restricting and teacher-unfriendly policy environment. In this context, some staff perceive her talking-up of change as somewhat forced.

- **Size**

As Blue Mountain’s enrolment almost doubled, its staff expanded too, beyond the initial core group who worked closely together and established the school’s vision. Newcomer staff did not always understand or share this vision.

- **Staff recruitment and selection**

Faced with making government-induced economies elsewhere in its system, the LEA has felt bound to relocate staff to Blue Mountain who are surplus to requirements in other schools. Maintaining the school’s original vision with this high rate of staff turnover is an increasing struggle.

- **LEA and government context**

Government policies to make extensive educational economies, tighten curriculum and assessment control, and introduce change at breakneck speed have had dramatic consequences for Blue Mountain. Teachers are retreating to their subject groups, and long-term planning is being abandoned for short-term implementation. Many teachers are becoming disillusioned, are saying that “the spark has gone”, are showing increased signs of stress, and are exploring options for early retirement, alternate careers or transfers to other schools.

- **Community support**

Like Lord Byron, Blue Mountain built strong relations with its community at the outset. Yet even here, administrators report that, with media-fuelled panics among parents about an alleged educational crisis, the school is now having to deal with a spate of unprecedented criticisms and complaints based on abstract anxieties rather than concrete experience.

What do these two schools' trajectories of change tell us about the sustainability of school reform? Both seem disappointing – displaying a loss of initial promise, a fading of enthusiasm and an eclipsing of local initiative and change capacity by the pressures and demands of LEA and government policy.

It is clear that individual school improvement efforts cannot be isolated from the surrounding policy context. Individual school change efforts can only be sustained if government policies do not directly undermine them. They also require strong and continuing government and LEA support that recognises the school's exceptionality and allows it to retain its key leaders and staff committed to the school's distinctive approach.

However, exceptional staff and leadership are, by definition, scarce resources in any LEA. Is it fair that one school persistently gets the best of them? Does this not then undercut the innovative capacities and opportunities of other schools? How does sustaining change in one school affect schools elsewhere?

Sustainability does not simply mean whether something can last. It addresses how particular initiatives can be developed without compromising the development of others in the surrounding environment, now and in the future. Sustainable change is therefore more than a question for individual schools but extends to whole LEAs and nations. This brings us to the third dimension of educational reform: breadth.

### **3. Breadth**

Schools and their LEAs are not all alike. Huge variations exist in the social and cultural characteristics of their students, the extent to which they involve teachers in policy development, the quality of leadership, and past experiences with change. Transplanting an initiative that has been successful in one LEA or group of schools to others is therefore exceedingly difficult. Transplanted initiatives soon become transformed ones, diverging sharply from initial intentions. This is known as the challenge of "scaling up" (Elmore 1995). We call it generalisability.

Strategies of generalising change have uneven success. Interestingly, these have mainly had a rather narrow, prescribed and somewhat conservative instructional focus on literacy and numeracy skills or direct instruction that certainly has not challenged the ingrained 'grammar of schooling'. They have provided breadth without depth.

Efforts at large-scale change that address deeper learning goals and that do show more promising signs of success have a persistent emphasis on teaching, learning and student performance, on partnerships that share and develop expertise, on extensive professional development, on stringent selection of teachers and leaders, and on assessment and accountability factors (Bryk et al, 1998, Elmore and Burney, 1998).

However, these initiatives are extremely vulnerable to shifts in political control. They have some breadth, and even depth, but no duration. This is even more true where reforms extend beyond single LEAs to entire nations. In this more ambitious case, system-wide co-ordination, maintaining a core emphasis on deep learning, sustaining political supportiveness and consistency, and locating as well as sustaining quality school leadership are all problematic.

## **Touchstones of three-dimensional change**

How can school reform become a successful three-dimensional process, so it has depth of learning, breadth of impact and sustainability over time? Three moral and strategic touchstones of reform – not prescriptive lessons, but areas of conscience which reformers should repeatedly consult – arise from our analysis.

### **1. Focus on deep learning, not just superficial performance results**

The educational battle against poverty, disadvantage and social inequality involves making broad connections with families and dramatic changes to the structure and curriculum of schools – to contextualise learning in a deep way, and create the conditions for it to occur. Yet, almost everywhere, this agenda is being pervasively whittled down to more specific preoccupations with literacy, numeracy and cognitive standards. Better achievement results don't necessarily mean deeper learning. Keeping a focus on deep learning which is cultural, emotional as well as cognitive, and on the conditions for rich learning among all students, is the most important touchstone of all.

### **2. Use Beacon schools to re-culture, and not just restructure, the system**

Deep learning ultimately demands changes in the century-old 'grammar of schooling'. While specific parts of an innovative school's legacy may get widely adopted elsewhere, reform by wholesale structural cloning seems inadvisable. Yet, unexpectedly, Byron did make a more lasting, long-term contribution to systemic reform – through re-culturing, as much as restructuring. Leaders who left Byron (to its own costs of sustainability) spread themselves throughout the system, exporting parts of Byron's organisation and philosophy so that they slowly became embedded in the cultures of other schools. Using Beacon schools as a patient long-term strategy for re-culturing a system through leadership development is worth pursuing more self consciously, even though this might prejudice the sustainability of change in the Beacon school itself. In other words, this inverse relationship between generalisability and individual school sustainability might be approached as a benign rather than a tragic one.

### **3. Treat the wider policy context as integral to school and LEA reform efforts, not just as an irritant**

The ultimate goal of educational reform must be to establish, not just islands and archipelagos of improvement, but entire continents of change (Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan 1996). Crucial parts of the policy context repeatedly sabotage this goal, yet reformers and researchers rarely confront them directly. Policy climates that undermine teachers' working conditions and lower their morale by repeatedly shaming them for student failure are at the very heart of most failed reform efforts, and seriously jeopardise efforts to recruit excellent new teachers to the teaching profession.

If and when particular governments can be persuaded to alter these factors, subsequent shifts of political control will probably only reverse them. In the end, educators would be well advised to also capture the public imagination on which governments ultimately depend, by making their practice and improvement efforts highly visible to the community of taxpayers, and helping create a broad social movement for large-scale, deep and sustainable transformations in state education that will benefit all pupils – a movement that will transform public and political attitudes as dramatically as the Green, women's and civil rights movements have done (Hargreaves, in press).

Deep, sustainable, generalisable reform is, therefore, not achieved instantly by mandate or by other quick fixes. Expecting to make full progress on all three dimensions at once is unrealistic. Three-dimensional reform is an ambitious, determined, complex and incredibly patient, as well

as politically controversial, balancing act. Anyone who seriously believes otherwise must ask themselves why simpler, short-term strategies have failed so persistently until now.

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