

Preface

If there is one thing that you should remember from page one and all the way through this book it is the concept of *collective capacity*. It is the key to *All Systems Go* and the component most likely to be neglected by policymakers. Collective capacity is when groups get better—school cultures, district cultures, and government cultures. The big collective capacity and the one that ultimately counts is when they get better conjointly—collective, collaborative capacity, if you like. Collective capacity generates the emotional commitment and the technical expertise that no amount of individual capacity working alone can come close to matching.

Prior to the 1997 election in Britain, when Tony Blair asked Michael Barber to join him in crafting a comprehensive strategy for improving literacy and numeracy in all primary schools in the country, they started down the path of all systems go. For a while, upon being elected they had the knack of whole-system reform. From 1997 to 2001, literacy and numeracy achievement rose substantially from about 62% to 75% (as measured by proficiency of 11-year-olds). Quite an accomplishment, as we are talking about over 20,000 primary schools. In his second term, 2001 to 2005, with a large majority, Blair got distracted with other matters and lost the plot in educational reform, although his government did go on to do interesting things in public sector reform as described in Sir Michael's fascinating account, *Instruction to Deliver* (2008).

Along came Dalton McGuinty in 2002 as if on cue. Leader of the opposition in Ontario, he aspired to be the education premier, not just in name but in a deep “all systems go” manner. He studied Britain's reform strategy, asked me to join him, and got elected as premier in Ontario in October, 2003. Over the past six years (including a large majority reelection in 2007), Dalton did not lose the plot. He thickened it to the point that Ontario now has one of the most

explicit whole-system models around. McGuinty remains, for me, the best self-conscious, deliberate, whole-system education reform leader in government anywhere in the world. I am biased, of course, but his strategy and its results are there for anyone to see—and we will take these up in the course of this book.

At the same time, we have the international benchmark stars as assessed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) with its highly regarded testing of the performance of 15-year-olds in literacy, science, and math—the top performers are Finland, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Canada (Ontario and Alberta; PISA includes all Canadian provinces and reports results separately for each—there is no federal presence in education government in Canada). The first three are smallish (5 million people or so) and not diverse in the same way as the United States and Canada. Korea is large, but again not diverse; and because of its culture, it is able to pursue reform with a degree of resoluteness and top-downness.

We have something to learn from these high performers as I will identify in the book, but they are (except for Canada) too different to serve as models for whole-system reform in North America as a whole. Canada, for example, is more instructive for the United States, although it differs in some important respects. Alberta has led the way for many years with its collaborative alliances among the trustees association, superintendents, unions, and the government, although I don't feature their strategies in this book. Ben Levin, Ken Leithwood, and I are currently working with the College of Alberta School Superintendents and the Alberta Department of Education on their next wave of reform through, among other things, a major initiative on "Moving and Improving" school districts. It is Ontario that I feature in this book because it has a more explicit whole-system-reform approach that we will see reflected in the course of the various chapters.

And now, we have the new Obama administration with its highly touted Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, and state governors around the United States who are trying to figure out how they slipped from number one in the world in high school and university attainment. For most of the 20th century (until about 1980) the United States led the world only to have its fortunes reversed with a steady decline in PISA parlance to about 24th. They are badly in need of making all systems go in the other direction.

There is quite a lot of focus in this book on improving education in the United States. This is partly because it represents such a large, egregious example of failed reform. In 1980, it had one of the most accomplished public education systems in the world. Over the past 30 years, it has slipped while other countries have steadily passed it. All this while *quadrupling* its education expenditure (see Grubb, 2009; Hanushek & Lindseth, 2009). How fascinating! (A phrase I borrowed from Michael Barber [2008] who used it for a different situation.)

The reason for paying attention now to the United States is that there appears to be a growing awareness in that country about the need to really do something about its slipping performance. Another fascination—when the first cracks were already in evidence, a national commission report dramatically concluded in 1983, “if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). As things got worse, from there on in it seemed the giant could not waken itself. External forces in the form of at least 20 countries evidently and transparently outperforming the United States in a globally interdependent world might be the wake up call that works. The emphasis on the United States notwithstanding, this book also draws on policies and strategies of other successful countries, including Canada, Asia, and Scandinavian jurisdictions.

This book tackles whole-system reform in a practical way based on our experience and the evidence. I boil it down to a small number of critical components while advising that the “distractors”—strategies that waste time and resources and clutter the problem—be stripped away. I have written equally for politicians and professionals, whatever level they are at—local, intermediate, or system—teachers, principals, community leaders, superintendents, board members, state department officials, state commissioners, governors, premiers, presidents. All systems go must encompass all leaders. In a companion book to this one (Fullan, 2010, and forthcoming), I have captured the solution as a motion-leadership proposition. *Motion Leadership: The Skinny on Becoming Change Savvy* addresses what leaders do to get positive movement forward by using the smallest number of powerful, high-leverage strategies that any leader with effort can master. *All Systems Go* is the skinny on getting whole-system reform—any politician can do this with focus and effort.

In Part I, I take an overview look at the system as a whole. In Chapter 1, the basic idea of whole-system reform is addressed, including what it looks like and why it is critical to the success of any country, indeed the world. In Chapter 2, I show why most current strategies are bound to fail. They look good from a distance; but upon closer inspection, they are a gross waste of political, human, and fiscal resources. They badly fail the collective-capacity test.

The three chapters in Part II take up the details of whole-system reform at the school, district, and state levels—what it really looks like and ideas for getting there. It is in these chapters that I make the critical distinction between collective capacity (which is exponentially powerful) and individual capacity (which is necessary but not sufficient).

In Part III, Chapter 6, I focus on the most difficult and decidedly essential part of the solution—how politicians and professionals must unite, maintaining their respective roles and responsibilities for their own good and for the good of society as a whole. If we can get this right, we will enter a new era in which whole-system reform will become a continuous reality.

We now know enough to make all systems go. It will be difficult but is definitely doable. If there is one domain in society where everyone wins, it is by increasing the educational attainment of all students. It is time to raise the bar and reduce the gap for all citizens. We have never come as close to knowing how to do this as we are now. It is complex work but, as we shall see, not the least bit mysterious.