

Foreword

R*realization: The Change Imperative for Deepening District-Wide Reform* is one of those books that gives me great encouragement that large-scale reform is indeed possible. Lyn Sharratt and Michael Fullan show how ordinary people, using what we know and applying it with insight and persistence, can accomplish great things. This book furnishes a clear and compelling account of how whole-system reform can be achieved.

Public schooling is a mass production enterprise. I do not intend by this phrase anything mechanical, linear, or industrial—quite the contrary. I mean only that it is large scale in almost all political jurisdictions, involving millions of students, thousands of staff, billions of dollars, and a great deal of real estate. Such a mass production enterprise cannot depend for most of its success on a small proportion of exceptionally talented or exceptionally committed people. Although these people, able to accomplish great things against all odds, should always be supported and will often make important differences.

But the enterprise, day to day, needs to function acceptably well when it is staffed by a relatively normal distribution of the adult population. The work they are expected to do needs to be achievable—and achievable with realistic amounts of effort and talent. The odds need to be stacked in favor, not against, their success. Indeed, the achievements of our current schools probably represent what can reasonably be achieved under the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Contrary to the views of many, the prevailing model for “doing school” is an enormously adaptive response to the mass production demands placed on it. Few social organizations can match the durability of schools. They are sensitively aligned to the terms and conditions of the social contract that exists between them and the publics they serve. It is the sensitivity of that alignment that accounts for the

durability (some would say inertia) of schooling, as we know it, in the face of considerable criticism and persistent efforts to reform.

The terms of that social contract are many, extending far beyond helping children learn what is outlined in the official curriculum. While such learning is clearly the centerpiece, the contract also includes, for example, child care, community building, and surrogate parenting. In addition, the contract stipulates the resources available for the work, places constraints on how those resources are to be used, and prescribes most of the institutional arrangements within which schooling will take place. It is these more comprehensive terms of the social contract that account for much of what reformers would like to change.

But it is rare indeed for reformers to significantly challenge or change most terms of the social contract in order to realize their preferred goals. Their efforts, rather, are best described as tinkering around the edges of the contract, tweaking the standard model of schooling, or, quite frequently, creating aspirational goals for student learning with little or no realistic consideration of how the other terms of the social contract would need to change for schools to actually realize such goals. As bizarre as it seems, on those occasions when the terms of the social contract are significantly changed, the changes are as likely to make it harder rather than easier for those in schools to hold up their end of the bargain—providing less rather than more discretion to get the job done, less rather than more time to thoughtfully prepare for the learning of one's students, fewer rather than more resources, and the like.

On a recent visit to Naples, Florida, I ran across two articles on education in the same edition of the local paper.¹ The article on page 9B, headlined “Fla. High School Graduation Standards May Increase,” described a bill expected to be passed by the state legislature (and strongly backed by Florida's business community) that would “increase math and science requirements and raise the passing grade for the 10th grade Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test [FCAT].” The article on page 3B carried the headline “Lee Board Urges Parents to Speak Loudly Against Drastic Budget Cuts.”² It described the difficulties about to be faced by one of the local school districts because of the roughly \$60 to \$80 million anticipated shortfall in state allocations to the district for the 2009–2010 budget year. According to this article, such cuts could only be accommodated by eliminating 578 positions, cancelling all art and music programs, and making many other across-the-board cuts.

One need not have scored level 2 on the FCAT³ to see how these two sets of events are related; “misaligned” would be putting it mildly,

and “dreaming in technicolor” might be a good description of the legislators’ state of mind. But as obvious as this misalignment would seem to be, other cases are depressingly easy to find. So this book by Lyn Sharratt and Michael Fullan comes as a great relief to people like me who believe that most public schools do a remarkable job of education within the constraints imposed by their social contracts, as they are typically constructed, and could do a much better job if some of the terms of that social contract were significantly altered.

The work described in this book provides compelling evidence that when schools are provided with opportunities to significantly increase their resources—in this case, primarily the skills and knowledge of teachers, administrators, and parents—their students are the big winners. This is the case, at least, when considerable effort is made to ensure that other terms of the social contract are modified and aligned in light of this increased capacity and the effort that it requires. But the district-wide (and eventually province-wide) project described in this book goes far beyond justifying these important claims. It illustrates, in ways that seem largely portable to other district contexts, what it takes beyond increasing the district’s capacities to realize the changes in practice made possible by those new capacities.

These lessons about realization go the heart of school improvement; they also help explain why so many well-intentioned large-scale reform efforts produce disappointing results. These are lessons about the importance of uncommon amounts of persistence in the face of competing priorities, unfailing attention to the details of implementation, hard-nosed decisions about how best to allocate scarce resources, ego-free leadership, and ongoing attention to evidence about what is working and what needs to be modified. Realization, this book shows us quite convincingly, is not for the faint of heart or the impatient. This book has critical messages for those aiming to actually help schools do a better job for their students and should be required reading for anyone with that goal in mind.

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NOTES

1. Kaczor, B., “Fla. High School Graduation Standards May Increase,” *Associated Press*, March 25, 2009.
2. Williams, L., “Lee Board Urges Parents to Speak Loudly Against Drastic Budget Cuts,” *Naples Daily News*, March 25, 2009.
3. To pass, students need to score at or above level 2 on the five-level FCAT.