

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *The New Mission for School Systems*

As societies have confronted the challenges brought about by globalization and new technologies, especially information technologies, the critical importance of education has become obvious to all. Political leaders have taken an unprecedented interest in public education and in charting a new mission for school systems.

The old mission was about providing access for all to basic education and access for a relatively small elite to university education. It is easy to underestimate the achievements of education systems in developed countries in securing universal education for all to the age of 15 or 16 years and in creating university places for between 20 and 50 percent of the student population. This achievement stands as one of the great social advances of the last century.

The new mission takes over where the old one left off. It is to get *all* students to meet high standards of education and to provide them with a lifelong education that does not have the built-in obsolescence of so much old-style curriculum but that equips them to be lifelong learners.

The benefits of having a good education are widely recognized, and the personal benefits are still a great incentive to individuals to do well. What are now much clearer are the substantial economic and social costs associated with *failure* to learn and failure to achieve one's full potential.

The authors have been working on the question of what is needed for the next radical breakthrough in education and have made

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considerable progress in defining and implementing the key elements: Hill and Crévola in specifying the new Critical Learning Instructional Paths that will be required, which have been built working with actual classrooms and schools; and Fullan in transforming the tri-level system of school/community, district, and state. The Breakthrough we are seeking involves the education community as a whole establishing a system of expert data-driven instruction that will result in daily continuous improvement for all students in all classrooms.

A number of authors have noted the ceiling effect that so often accompanies literacy- and numeracy-improvement initiatives. The diagnosis has been accurate (current strategies and conditions are not powerful enough to take us to the next stage or breakthrough), but no one has provided a clear picture of what the new paradigm would actually look like and how it would function. The latter is precisely what we have sought to develop, and that picture is the essence of this book.

We believe that the ingredients necessary for a breakthrough exist in one form or another in those countries with which we have worked most closely: Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. What is required now is to understand why dominant current strategies do not work and what would be entailed in creating a new approach that incorporates the essential components into one integrated system that has the power to bring about the transformation.

### **A SYSTEM STALLED**

Within the current paradigm, even with all the best decisions and with considerable resources for education, only partial, nonsustainable gains are being made. England's ambitious literacy and numeracy initiative started in 1997 with a flourish, moving in a short four years from about 62 percent of 11-year-olds achieving proficiency in literacy and numeracy to some 73 to 75 percent by 2000; then, outcomes plateaued for four straight years (Earl, Fullan, Leithwood, & Watson, 2003).

The new mission for schools is to achieve 90 to 95 percent success. This is what it will take for societies to thrive in the complex world of the 21st century. And the goal is not just about literacy and

numeracy scores. It is about learning to learn, about becoming independent thinkers and learners. It is about problem solving, teamwork, knowledge of the world, adaptability, and comfort in a global system of technologies, conflict, and complexity. It is about the joy of learning and the pleasure and productivity of using one's learning in all facets of work and life pursuits.

Much can be learned, especially from those reform attempts that appear to do a lot of the right things and yet still fall short, revealing fundamental limitations of a paradigm that misses certain key ingredients. We plan to identify the most salient, high-yield strategies and focuses, ones that are currently underplayed yet can be feasibly undertaken once identified. But first, let's start with the current situation to find out what is failing and what is missing.

A revealing place to start is the recent study by the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (2005), which contains case studies of reform in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle. All three school systems had the attention of political leaders at all levels of the system, focused on many of the "right things," such as literacy and math; all of the systems used obvious choice strategies such as concentration on "assessment for learning" data, invested heavily in professional development, developed new leadership, and focused on systemwide change.

And they had money—Seattle had \$35 million in external funds, Milwaukee had extra resources and flexibility, and Chicago had more money than it had ever seen. There was huge pressure, but success was not expected overnight. Decision makers and the public would have been content to see growing success over a five- or even ten-year period.

The upfront conclusion of the case study evaluators:

The three districts we studied had decentralized resources and authority to the schools in different ways and had undergone significant organizational changes to facilitate their ambitious, instructional improvement plans. The unfortunate reality for the many principals and teachers we interviewed is that the districts were unable to change and improve practice on a large scale. (Cross City Campaign, 2005, p. 4)

One of our goals in this book is to help the reader look beneath current reform initiatives to identify missing high-yield components.

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Reform strategies are getting better (this is why we think, with additional concerted effort, education could soon reach a new tipping point), so it is crucial to zero in on the key problem areas. For us, the core problem is a failure to establish classroom routines and practices that represent personalized, ongoing, “data-driven focused instruction,” which we will explain in subsequent chapters.

In the meantime, the issues in the Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle reforms help identify the missing ingredient, even though they appear to get most components right. Chicago, for example, appeared to have an impressive strategy:

Academic standards and instructional frameworks, assessment and accountability systems, and professional development for standards-based instruction are among the tools of systemic reform that are used to change classroom instruction. (Cross City Campaign, 2005, p. 23)

Here is a “standards-based” systemwide reform that sounds as if it should work. So what is the problem? In our view, the strategy lacks a focus on what needs to change in instructional practice. In Chicago, teachers did focus on standards and coverage, but in interviews, they “did not articulate any deep changes in teaching practice that may have been under way” (Cross City Campaign, 2005, p. 23). Furthermore,

Instructional goals were more often articulated in terms of student outcomes or achievement levels than in terms of instructional quality, that is, *what the schools do* to help students achieve. (p. 29, italics in original)

When systems tighten the focus on instructional goals, they get initial results (in the Chicago sample, schools had shown improvement on standardized tests over the past five years). This is the old mission of schools: to move from some 50 percent of the students achieving proficiency to 70 percent, but this is not good enough. The new mission is 90 percent and above, and gains need to be both sustained and deepened as portals for students to become independent learners.

The new mission will require substantial changes in daily instructional practice on the part of all teachers and parallel changes

in the infrastructure to support such changes. In later chapters, we will identify the nature of these changes in classroom routines and in the infrastructure needed to support such transformation.

Milwaukee reveals similar problems in achieving instructional improvements while using greater decentralization in the context of system support and competitive choice. The focus was on literacy; a literacy coach was housed in every school in the district; considerable professional development and technical support services were available. Education plans for each school were to focus on literacy standards through (1) data analysis and assessment, and (2) subject-area achievement targets, including literacy across the curriculum.

Sounds like a convincing strategy. However, what is missing again is the black box of instructional practice in the classroom. The case writers observe:

We placed the Education Plan in the indirect category due to its non-specificity regarding regular or desired instructional content and practices. (Cross City Campaign, 2005, p. 49)

More generally, the report concludes that while these serious districtwide reform initiatives “appeared” to prioritize instruction, they did so indirectly (through standards, assessment, leadership responsibilities). However, in the experience of principals and teachers, the net effect was that “policies and signals were non-specific regarding intended effects on classroom teaching and learning” (p. 65).

Our third case, Seattle, is a variation on the same theme. The game plan looks good. Standards defined the direction while the district’s Transformational Academic Achievement Planning Process “was designed as a vehicle for helping schools develop their own strategy for (1) helping all students meet standards, and (2) eliminating the achievement gap between white students and students of color” (p. 66). As in Milwaukee, the district reorganized to support site-based management, including the allocation of considerable resources to schools. The case writers observe:

The recent effort to become a standards-based district was one of the first sustained instructional efforts with direct attention to teaching and learning. However, the conversations district leaders had about standards *were rarely connected to changes in instruction*. (Cross City Campaign, 2005, p. 69, our italics)

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The report continues:

At the school level, finding teachers who understood the implications of standards for their teaching was difficult. (p. 72)

Without a more careful understanding of the new mission of schools, one would be hard-pressed to understand why the reform plans of Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle will not succeed. They will move scores forward—to a point. They contain glimpses of what will be required, but they fail to touch deeply day-to-day classroom instruction, and to touch it in a way that will get results for all. And what is more elusive is that the designers of the strategy believe that they have made instruction the centerpiece of the strategy. There is nothing more difficult to address than the case where people think that they are doing something when in reality they are not. It is not a case of deceiving others but rather of unwittingly deceiving oneself. When you don't know what you don't know, it is difficult to see what needs to be done.

Richard Elmore (2004) has been a relentless critic of the failure of school reform to get at the instructional core of schooling. Reform strategies, he argues, are “often not explicitly connected to fundamental changes in the way knowledge is constructed, nor to the division of responsibility between teachers and student [or] the way students and teachers interact with each other around knowledge” (p. 10). The crux of the problem, says Elmore, is that failing schools fundamentally lack what he calls *internal accountability*: “That is, they lack agreement and coherence around expectations for student learning, and they lack the means to influence instructional practice in classrooms in ways that result in student learning” (p. 234, our italics). We have already seen that external performance-based accountability is largely silent on how to achieve change in classroom practice, a point reinforced by Elmore: “In fact there is no well-worked-out theory of how you get from performance-based accountability to improvements in teaching and learning” (pp. 220–221).

In our own work with schools, we have sought to influence instructional practice by challenging the beliefs and understandings of teachers and school administrators, particularly around the notion that all students can achieve high standards given sufficient time and support. In initial discussions with school staffs, this notion was rarely rejected, but it was frequently qualified by all sorts of “Yes,

but . . .” excuses as to why such a notion was generally true but didn’t apply to some or even all of *their* students.

Elmore (2004) identifies another of the flaws in old mission work, namely, expecting linear gains to continue in student learning. The old mission demands steady movement upward; the new mission understands plateaus as stepping stones for going deeper. In referring to two schools with which he had close relationship, Elmore observes:

Thornton and Clemente [schools] had initial gains, but their performance has gone flat and sits below target. This is actually a predictable pattern through the entire improvement process if you understand what it takes to move instructional practice at scale in schools and school systems. Significant gains in schools . . . are usually followed by periods of flat performance. These periods of flat performance are actually very important parts of the improvement process—they are the periods in which individual teachers consolidate and deepen the knowledge and practices they acquired in earlier stages, in which schools diagnose and identify barriers to the next stage of improvement, and in which they diagnose the next set of problems and look for the capacity to work on them. In existing accountability systems, these flat periods are seen as failures to improve, they carry heavy penalties. From the inside, these flat periods are actually important phases of improvement; improvement continues, even though performance is [temporarily] flat. (p. 248)

When performance plateaus or appears flat despite considerable effort to improve, one must look deeper in two respects: (1) to see if all the specific ingredients for improvement are actually being worked on, and (2) to realize that the next breakthrough may take additional time for new capacities to “kick in.” Our work in York Region (just north of Toronto, Canada) illustrates some of these characteristics: a strong model, the need for greater precision in implementation, and an appreciation of the powerful platform that has been established for going to the next step of improvement (see Sharratt & Fullan, in press; see also Fullan, 2006).

External accountability systems are fundamentally flawed with respect to the plateau phenomenon. These schemes do not influence classroom practice effectively because they do not take into account the need to develop internal accountability in the school and the

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district. Thus, this kind of accountability cannot distinguish an improving school going through a flat period from a stagnant school that will never improve if left on its own.

If the school does not have its internal act together, it simply does not have the capacity to improve. In fact, it does not know *how* to improve, and no amount of external browbeating will produce capacity where it doesn't exist. As Elmore (2004) puts it:

It seems unlikely . . . that schools operating in a default mode—where all questions of accountability related to student learning are essentially questions of individual teacher responsibility, will be capable of responding to strong, obtrusive external accountability systems in ways that lead to systematic deliberate improvement of instructional practice and therefore, the overall performance of its students implies a capacity for collective deliberation and action that schools in our sample did not exhibit. Where virtually all decisions about accountability are decisions [made by default] by individual teachers, based on their individual conceptions of what they and their students can do, it seems unlikely that these decisions will somehow aggregate into overall improvement for the school. (p. 197)

Elmore (2004) has nailed the problem, but his solution is outlined only in broad strokes: focus on increasing internal accountability and alter the incentive systems and working conditions so that schools can develop into “highly interactive, relatively coherent, informal and formal systems” of continuous improvements (p. 193). Elmore has many more helpful suggestions, but they tend mainly to point us in the right direction rather than provide ideas about *how* to proceed. We need to go from broad strokes to specific action without falling into the trap of prescription. This is the difference between our solutions of “data-driven focused instruction” and solutions bearing the mark of direct instruction. It is the difference between precision and prescription.

### THE PRESCRIPTION TRAP

If external performance standards do not get inside classroom practice, and if schools left to their own devices produce widely varied and inconsistent results, what is the solution? It is understandable



that those desiring reform have moved toward greater prescription of what should happen in the classroom, especially if they justify their actions on the basis of moral purpose and evidence. Our own position is that prescription is a partial “old mission” solution that can obtain useful start-up results but is ultimately on the wrong track.

Our colleague Andy Hargreaves (2003) rejects prescription as downright dangerous: having cult-like qualities, being applied only to districts serving poorer communities, and creating a kind of apartheid of improvement, with better-off communities being able to pursue richer and deeper learning goals while poor communities become mired in drabness. Hargreaves contrasts prescription (which he calls Performance Training Sects) with collaborative communities (Professional Learning Communities). The former is characterized by knowledge transfer, imposed requirements, false certainty, intensive training, sects of performance, and the like, whereas the latter transforms knowledge, shares inquiry, engages in continuous learning, and builds communities of practice.

We think that Hargreaves’s analysis is too crude and doesn’t take us very far. It puts advocates of prescription on the defensive without giving them any convincing reasons to question their approaches, and it gives license to professional learning communities without any detailed strategy for accomplishing change in classrooms on a large scale. In later work, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) offer a more promising set of ideas for sustainable reform, but they don’t deal with instructional transformation.

The solution must entail greater specificity without suffering the downside of prescription. But first, we must provide a more insightful appreciation of the strengths and limitations of prescription.

Prescription is appealing because it applies specificity to instruction with the promise of and in some cases the evidence of increased student performance. We will conclude that prescription has certain fatal flaws and that as a result, it will not get us to the deep changes required for the 21st century.

Prescriptive teaching often goes under the name of “direct instruction” and is used to refer generally to direct approaches to curriculum and instruction. In their meta-analysis of Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) designs, Borman, Hewes, Overman, and Brown (2003) indicated that, of the three models for which extensive research showed evidence of effectiveness for student achievement, two made extensive use of direct instruction approaches.

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John Hattie's (1999) meta-analysis also indicates strong support for such approaches. He lists a large number of interventions and reports their mean effect size. The top three on his list are:

Feedback	0.81
Direct instruction	0.81
Prior achievement	0.80

So what is it about direct instruction or more prescriptive approaches that make them work, and why do they share the top spot along with feedback?

It comes as no surprise that feedback is among the top three interventions. It is, in fact, at the core of our Breakthrough solution. Good formative assessment can generate feedback for teachers to guide their teaching and feedback for students to guide their learning. The importance of prior achievement is also readily understandable. We argue later that knowing students' starting points is crucial because a student's readiness to learn is related to what he or she already knows and can do.

But what about direct instruction or prescription? Direct instruction is about the teacher being in control and directing the learning, using highly scripted lessons developed through detailed analysis of the curriculum and what it would take to learn it.

In schools in which teachers are poorly prepared and in which students have little prior knowledge to build on, direct instruction imposes its own form of discipline. It is structured and breaks learning into tiny steps so that underperforming students start to make progress. It puts teachers in control, teachers who may have spent much of their careers on the verge of chaos and disorder. This is why direct instruction has established a stronghold in inner-city schools and in schools in which there is constant disruption. Not surprisingly, most of the research into direct instruction has been conducted in these contexts. You rarely find such stringent approaches in affluent suburban schools, and really competent teachers simply reject direct instruction as de-skilling and overly prescriptive.

In situations characterized by a long history of failure, direct instruction often has success in getting students started in their learning, but the initial momentum and success are not sustained. There are a variety of reasons for this, including indirect ones such as superficial "adoption" decisions in which district and state advocates

lose interest or are replaced by new leaders with different agendas (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000). But for us a more direct core reason for lack of sustainability is that while direct instructional approaches improve student achievement, students do not become independent learners, and when confronted with the new, they don't know what to do.

At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that more open approaches to learning in which the teacher acts primarily as facilitator have been even less successful. There is much to admire about direct instruction programs such as Success for All, which have accepted the chaotic environments of many inner-city schools and have tried to develop virtually teacher-proof materials and highly structured routines for classrooms to bring about a sense of order and purpose and to take away the hard work of planning the details of the teaching program.

Success for All and some other direct instruction programs have achieved remarkable short-term gains. Fielding, Kerr, and Rosier (2004) describe how Kennewick School District in the state of Washington, using rigorous direct instruction (mostly the Open Court program), moved Grade 3 reading results upward in the 13 elementary schools in the district. Between 1996 and 2004, the district average for third-grade proficiency moved from 74 percent to 88 percent, with several schools moving from the high 70s to 90s.

But in the end, all programs that make use of direct instructional approaches are trapped within a logic that fails students. The very act of scripting lessons means that we are talking about predetermined starting points with groups of students proceeding in a lockstep fashion. Yes, the best prescriptive programs start where individual students are, but the very act of putting teachers in control means that the students must follow the teacher, rather than the teacher following the students. In the end, we want to put the students in control of their learning process.

Boredom is what eventually gets both the teachers and the students. This is why many programs that rely on direct instruction are often discontinued by schools after a few years. These programs do not believe in the power of teachers as learners or of students as thinkers and problem solvers. As such, they cannot achieve long-term breakthrough results.

Direct instructional approaches lead to short-term gains, but a price is paid in terms of narrow control for teachers and little control for students. *Breakthrough* is an argument for changing the current

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model of classroom instruction to solve the very problems that direct instruction necessarily creates and reinforces. Direct instruction creates a perverse dependency to achieve short-term results. Our Breakthrough solution—a system based on focused instruction—matches the short-term effects of direct instruction while building the conditions for longer-term effects that will be shown to be far more enduring than those of direct instruction.

In short, greater precision does not mean greater prescription. We don't have to choose between loose professionalism and external imposition.

We are left then with a rather discouraging picture: Despite scads of money, the use of the best expertise to design and put into place strategies most likely to succeed, and the political will to stay the course, no one has yet cracked the classroom code leading to better instruction for all. Attempts to crack the code by specifying routines of instructional prescription give schools a false sense of progress with pernicious side effects. We can do better, much better.

We see the need to combine moral purpose with feasible, powerful strategies that give schools confidence that they can accomplish educational goals never before achieved. Our basic beliefs are founded on the moral purpose of education, not just for students but for teachers as well. And there are certain nonnegotiable beliefs:

- All students can achieve high standards, given significant time and support.
- All teachers can teach to high standards, given the right conditions and assistance.
- High expectations and early intervention are essential.
- Teachers need to learn all the time, and they need to be able to articulate both what they do and why they do it. (Hill & Crévola, 1999)

The difference between 1999 and now is that we think it is possible to realize these beliefs in practice—on a large scale, for all. The new mission of schools aims high: education that is truly for all. No one has yet provided a feasible platform for such grand accomplishments. Such a mission is within our grasp. We need to put our energy in the right combination of places. Subsequent chapters take us on this new breakthrough journey.