

# The *Future* of the Principalship

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I shall start this paper in a somewhat straightforward, but still deep way in order to set the stage for pushing ahead into the future of the principalship as I see it. There is no substantial gap in what we need to know in order to improve schools and student learning and achievement on a very wide scale. In this brief paper I will (1) encapsulate what we obviously know; (2) what we should know but fail to understand; and (3) identify the role and action implications for school principals and for those involved in improving the principalship.

## What We Obviously Know

We can identify the key things we know, many of which have been more precisely portrayed in the past three years. On the obvious side, yet still difficult to implement on a wide scale, we know that:

1. Teachers who are strong on content and pedagogical knowledge and who care deeply and have moral purpose about learning and students are more effective.
2. Teachers who use internal and external assessment of learning data on an ongoing basis for both improving learning and marking progress are more effective.
3. Teachers who learn from others (again, on an ongoing basis) inside and outside the school are more effective.
4. Teachers who are led by principals and other school leaders who foster the first three qualities are more effective.
5. Teachers in districts that focus on developing district-wide cultures that develop and cultivate the previous four elements are more effective.
6. Teachers in state systems that integrate accountability and capacity building, while establishing partnerships across the three levels (school, community, district and state) are more effective.

Here is some of the most recent crosscutting evidence. Leithwood and his colleagues' (2006) findings on "seven strong claims about successful school leaders" cover several of the findings just identified. Citing teacher quality as the strongest causal determinant of learning, Leithwood's first claim is that "school leadership is second only to classroom teaching" in impacting student achievement. In particular, school leaders indirectly but powerfully affect teachers and in turn, student learning through:

*building vision and direction, understanding and developing people, redesigning the organization (to establish effective working conditions), and managing the teaching and learning program (p. 7).*



More particularly, the authors say that effective school leadership affects directly teacher capacity, motivation and commitment, and working conditions, which in turn "alters teaching practices" linked to student learning and achievement.

The qualities of teachers and the conditions under which they work are powerfully related to whether we will have enough teachers on any scale to invest and sustain the energy and actions necessary for continuous improvement.

Susan Moore Johnson's (2004) *Finders and Keepers* makes it painfully clear that high quality teachers will come and stay (all the while getting better) only under supportive and demanding conditions; conditions and cultures that have very high expectations for



We know all this and I have recently brought together many of the most recent findings in the fourth edition of *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (2007a). The question is why are we not doing something to use this proven knowledge on a wide scale? The next section addresses this more subtle and fundamental question.

### What We Should Know But Fail to Understand

Most of the obvious solutions - focus on standards, provide mentoring and establish professional learning communities - turn out to be superficial. This is not because they are not on the right track, but rather because they fail to realize how other more fundamental conditions need to be at the core of any effort. These core conditions that I will spell out briefly are very difficult to change. Let me put it dramatically via Peter Cole's (2004) wry article, *Professional development: A good way to avoid change*. Professional development is workshops and no matter how relevant they are, it is not the same as learning every day. It feels like progress, but in reality does not make an impact.

Elmore (2004) nailed the problem when he observed:

*Improvement is ... a function of learning to do the right things in the setting where you work. (p. 73) Alas, the problem (is that) there is almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and substantial learning about their practice in the settings in which they actually work, observing and being observed by their colleagues in their classrooms and classrooms of other teachers in other schools confronting similar problems. (p. 127)*

These are profound conclusions. Only a radical change in the working conditions of schools and indeed in the entire culture of the teaching profession will produce continuous learning on a large scale. This means also a radical change in the role of the principal.

In *Breakthrough* which we define as full success (95% for example, in literacy for all), we set out what it will take for this to happen (Fullan, Hill & Crévola, 2006). We argued that three Ps need to be put in place: precision, personalization and personal learning. Precision and personalization are about meeting the unique needs of each student on a timely and precise basis. Professional learning (note that we did not say professional development) consists of every teacher learning every day individually and collectively. The entire system must be organized to make this happen. Put another way, the six components of success, which I summarized in section one, currently affect only a minority of teachers because there has been a failure to tackle the deeper structural and cultural barriers at work. The role of the principal entails putting school leaders in a realistic position to tackle this deep agenda.

It is not just a matter of new opportunities and supportive conditions. There are deep cultural barriers to be overcome. In *Breakthrough* we reported that several major, high profile, well funded district-wide reform efforts failed to get inside the classroom on any scale, and that this "deprivatization" of teaching

adults and students, and pursue these relentlessly through a combination of support and accountability.

Chris Day and his colleagues (2007) in England have even more definitively demonstrated that teachers matter. Teachers in their sample who sustained commitment over time did so because of a combination of leadership (of the kind identified by Leithwood, et al), colleagues (all the things we know about collaborative cultures) and personal support from family and friends (something less well studied in North America). Teachers undergoing declining commitment did so because of workload, pupil behavior and poor or unsupportive leadership; the very things that effective organizations address.

still represents a huge cultural as well as structural barrier. Until it becomes normal for all teachers to observe each other's teaching, facilitated by teacher leaders and other experts we will not have the conditions necessary for built-in change.

In addition, it is not just elevating the role of principals as instructional leaders and providing them with plenty of professional development. Ironically, as the role of the principal as key change agent is being recognized at all levels, more and more expectations are being added with little being taken away and little direct support. As the role of the principal becomes more and more important, the principalship is in danger of sinking!

This problem cuts more than one way. On the one hand, studies of the principalship show that the managerial tasks, arising from accountability and related bureaucracy, have become more and more onerous. On the other hand, many principals appear more comfortable with the managerial role. The large study of the principalship just conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) (2007) found both of these aspects at work. Yes, paperwork had increased dramatically, but PWC also notes that many principals appear to be "more comfortable with an operational (managerial) role than a strategic one" (p. vii). In other words, principals leading change (of the kind reported by Leithwood) focus on strategic issues first and take care of bureaucracy otherwise, while many other principals do the administration, managerial work first, and engage in strategic change if they have time, which of course they never do.

Finally, we are also discovering that we need solutions that involve reforming the entire system. Among other things this means new partnerships with parents and community agencies, eliminating isolated school autonomy (no matter how effective the particular individual school) in favor of schools working in clusters (what we have come to call lateral capacity building) and schools engaged upward in relation to system goals and overall performance. It takes each and every school to change an entire system. As an aside, the intent of our current Ontario-wide strategy is indeed to change the entire system: all 4,000 elementary schools, all 900 secondary schools and all 72 districts. I say all this to conclude how complex the solution will need to be. It is structural and normative and implicates all levels of the system.

### **Implications for the principalship**

The recognition by all practitioners and policy makers alike that the principal is key has been a mixed blessing so far. On the one hand, this has elevated the importance of the role; on the other hand, it has resulted in an overload of expectations and at the end of the day has set up the principalship for failure. We need then to re-position the debate and focus on what is most likely to realize the new potential for the role of the principal as change leader. This will entail a radical revamping of the role, as we now know it.

The push for this change must come from the inside and the outside. Within the role, in spite of current constraints, individual principals can (because many actually do) focus on instruction in a way that

overrides the managerial role. Many principals also take seriously the new recognition that as they focus on school improvement they must do so in a way that helps develop other leaders. There is increasing recognition that schools have a role in helping to accomplish district-wide and whole-system reform; but this will not be sufficient. We also need to step back and determine what the system should do by way of policy and strategy to help revamp the role of the principal. This agenda should be pursued in partnership between the government and districts, along with principals' organizations and teachers' unions. At least the following four aspects of the new role will have to be addressed.

First, the role of the principal should be re-examined to ensure that instructional leadership and changing the culture of the school toward greater internal and external collaboration is the paramount focus of school leadership. The moral purpose and corresponding knowledge for raising the bar and closing the gap of student learning and achievement should be front and centre in all schools. One very specific and practical element of this solution must involve new ways of addressing the managerial or operational side of the school's work. I am wary of any formulaic approach so any solution will need to be worked out in detail. There is no question that the role of the principal needs to be re-constituted in a way that incorporates new assistance in the form of school or "business managers". England has done this recently with great success. It requires a new role to take up the operational tasks of the school: plant, finance, safety, personnel. The role of this business manager needs to be clarified, and incumbents need to be trained and certified for the position. In large schools, this would mean a full-time position; in smaller schools, as the English have done, it might mean one full-time person serving a few schools. I realize this is a big change and cannot be done with the stroke of a pen or mechanically. If we are serious about having school principals lead continuous improvement, we had better make it possible to do so. The rewards can be considerable. In the one study in England that has been conducted of trained business managers, it was found that the affected schools saved some ten pounds sterling per pupil in efficiency of budget and raised some 50 to 60 additional pounds per pupil per school (Munby, 2007). The English system is different in funding so we cannot be literal here, but the double payoff is evident: (a) better use of and raising of money and (b) the many benefits of liberating the principal to concentrate on school improvement, parent and community partnership, and system reform.

I will be more brief about the second, third and fourth points. They all have to do with taking advantage - big advantage - of the freed-up role of the principal. The second point involves developing collaborative cultures *simultaneously* within and across schools. Collaboration within schools is essential in which teachers learn continuously from each other, but so is cross-school learning within which schools learn from each other; what we have called "lateral capacity-building". Principals need to lead this cultural change with help from districts, government and unions. It is beyond the scope of this article to address the role of unions, but in general terms the successful future of teacher unions likely will involve fostering interactive professionalism. Although I am focusing on the role of the principal in this article,

there is much to be said about addressing the leadership role of teachers and the corresponding overall improvement of the teaching profession: a topic for another time.

Third, all levels of the system must engage in fostering the development of new leaders: current leaders developing other leaders. Some radical steps may need to be taken here. The English have a number of new arrangements underway including executive heads running two or more schools so that leadership is being spawned across teams. We have to be careful because cultures differ, but the principle of multiple or teamed leaders across schools should be examined and selectively put into place. Similarly, identifying and cultivating pipelines of future leaders is essential: a practice increasingly underway in Ontario and elsewhere.

Fourth, we need to appreciate that school reform is system reform. I have written about this elsewhere (Fullan, 2007b). We will only make progress on whole system reform when school leaders are connected to the bigger picture, to district context, to state policy, to other schools locally and otherwise. When this larger interaction occurs, individual schools benefit and scores of schools, so engaged, benefit. In other words, the system as a whole improves.

In short, we have extracted nearly all there is to give in the current approach to the role of the principal. It is time to shift gears and reposition the role of school leaders. The benefits promise to be enormous and multiplicative.

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