Leading from the Middle

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The Top and Bottom of Leadership and Change

For the past 15 years and more, in the US, England, parts of Canada and elsewhere, the task of improving educational equity and excellence has been invested in large-scale reform across entire systems, designed and delivered in detail, by big government, from the top. Top-down reform promised a sharp focus on improving achievement in literacy and mathematics, and on increasing high school graduation rates; it aligned effort across whole systems; and it demonstrated accountability for results.

Some top-down strategies were accompanied by training, coaching and other professional development support. Others, like NCLB, proved excessively demanding in their measures requiring progress for all categories of students, every year, and unjustly punitive in the consequences they imposed on schools and districts that fell short (Braun, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Ravitch, 2011).

But whether they are punitive or supportive, all versions of top-down reform have an Achilles heel. Their focus on delivering the details of two or three measurable priorities is suitable only for systems pursuing traditional and rather narrow

achievement goals. A digital age of complex skills, increasing cultural diversity, and high-speed change calls for more challenging educational goals and more sophisticated and flexible change strategies.

So, more and more reformers are now advocating greater autonomy for schools and teachers, increased freedom for local curriculum design, and more independent and personalized access to technology. But the history of bottom-up innovation and individual school autonomy is not impressive. In the 1960s and 70s, innovative ideas often didn't spread beyond a few isolated classrooms and schools, and when they did spread, their implementation was often fatally flawed (Gross, Giacquinta, & Bernstein, 1971). There is no reason to believe that efforts to spread the success of a few innovative, high-tech schools will fare any better today.

In an age of innovation and diversity, top down strategies are inappropriate, while bottom-up strategies seem unable to achieve improvement on any significant scale. So what should we do instead? One way forward is to shift attention towards school districts in the middle of the system, where schools and teachers can be supported in innovating and improving together.

Leading In the Middle

In North America and Northern Europe, school districts have historically been regarded as the linchpin of local democracy (Katz, 1987; Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow,

Rollow, & Easton, 1998). Governor Jerry Brown of California has recognized this by returning control of educational spending back to the state's 900 plus local districts so that the maximum amount of control is placed at the most local level of competent authority wherever possible (Torlakson, 2015).

Districts can accomplish many important goals and functions. They can provide a valuable focus for school improvement; be a means for efficient and effective use of research evidence and analysis of data across schools; provide support so schools can respond coherently to multiple external reform demands; and be champions for families and students, making sure everybody gets a fair deal. Research on strong districts shows they are powerful forces for positive educational change (Leithwood, 2013). Strong and steadily improving districts like Boston and Long Beach Public Schools have received widespread acclaim for their system-wide gains (Barber, Chijioke, & Mourshed, 2011). In England, some of the most dramatic turnarounds have been in urban districts, like the London boroughs of Hackney and Tower Hamlets that went from the lowest performers in the country, to scoring above the national average on all key indicators (Hargreaves, Boyle, & Harris, 2014; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

So, some reformers argue that we need a stronger role for the "meso" or middle level of change, to implement changes from the top, and to move around ideas and

strategies that are percolating up from beneath (Schleicher, 2015). This amounts to a kind of leadership in the middle. It's a healthy kind of middle stage spread.

The Weakness of the Middle

Leading in the middle is a promising direction, but it's not enough. Not all local school systems or districts are strong. Some districts do well while others fare badly. Districts vary in their resources and capacities for change like networking and seeking out other ideas. Districts can be self-serving, politically toxic, glacially slow at driving improvement, and, as in the Atlanta cheating scandal, just plain corrupt.

In the US and England especially, there are unacceptable variations in quality among school districts. Due to differences in demographics, poverty levels, available funding, and the associated capacity to attract and develop effective leadership, very high performing and very low performing districts sometimes co-exist side-by-side (Noguera, 2014; Sutton Trust, 2015). This has created a conundrum of district-driven improvement:

Although all high performing nations are characterized by strong local control, not all nations with strong local control are high performing.

One response to this conundrum is to say that school districts are not worth saving, and either to deliver reforms in detail from the top, or institute market-based,

individualistic alternatives like charter schools, free schools, and academies that are insulated from district control. Another response is to use central funding formulae to compensate for bad variation and inequities. However, the strings attached to this funding often heap more grant-writing and accountability requirements on already overstretched high poverty districts.

Leading From the Middle

A third way to reduce bad variation among school districts is to promote collaboration among them so that they share resources, ideas, and expertise and also exercise collective responsibility for all their students' success. In this approach, that we call Leading *from* the Middle, districts don't just mediate and manage other people's reforms individually; they become the collective drivers of change and improvement together. When districts *Lead from the Middle* together, they

- *respond to local needs* and diversities.
- *take collective responsibility* for all students' and each other's success.
- *exercise initiative* rather than implementing other people's initiatives.
- *integrate* their own efforts with broad system priorities
- *establish transparency* of participation and results.

These components of *Leading from the Middle* are evident in two system-wide reforms with which we have been closely involved: the *Greater Manchester Challenge* in England, and district-driven improvements in Ontario, Canada.

The Greater Manchester Challenge (GMC)

The GMC was initiated in 2007-8 by the UK Government. It brought together ten school districts (known in the UK as local authorities) to improve standards over three years. One of us -Ainscow - was appointed as Senior Advisor to this $80m project. Given his years of researching and advocating for educational equity and inclusion, and his attachments to the area because he had been educated there as a child, Ainscow was very motivated to accept this full-time responsibility to promote system-wide equity and improvement. When the project was officially announced, he stated publicly that, "There are lots of good things going on in schools in Greater Manchester. The task now is to spread the best practice to all schools"

But how would this be done?
- Leaders of successful schools worked with weaker schools to improve their leadership teams.
- Schools with similar student populations were clustered to share best practices.
- Local problems would be met with local solutions.

Getting schools to collaborate was not a new phenomenon in England (Chapman et al., 2010; Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman, & West, 2011). What was different, though, was that while previous school-to-school networks and partnerships had tended to bypass local authorities, ten neighboring local authorities would now be driving improvement together (see Ainscow, 2015 for a full account of the GMC). In the words of one of the local authority planning committee members, "Look, this is simple. The job of schools is to improve themselves. Our job is to make sure this happens".

Multiple strategies were used to bring this simple principle to life. Many of these involved schools cooperating across Authority boundaries. Recently turned around schools became the "keys to success" in helping other schools. Hub schools that demonstrated excellence in particular areas provided extensive training and development for teachers in other schools and local authorities. Schools at different stages of development were organized in 'families'. A Jewish school assisted a predominantly Muslim partner. A Catholic school prayed for a good inspection result for its secular counterpart. Hidden capacity was capitalized on, knowledge was moved around, and old rivalries were overcome in pursuit of the higher purpose of the whole area's regeneration.

The Manchester area had suffered from historic problems of unemployment and deprivation for four decades, but by 2011, GMC schools were above the national

average on all standardized test measures. Secondary schools in the most

disadvantaged communities improved at three times the rate of the national

average.

By working together, principals (known in England as head-teachers) changed the

cultures of the schools. Instead of blaming parents in poor families for not being

interested in their children's learning, schools came to appreciate the great stresses

these families were under and then responded with local flexibility and intensive

support. There was a focus on better, more interesting teaching and learning,

through strategies like cooperative learning and Japanese Lesson Study. There was a

lot of pressure on teachers and schools to work really hard to improve results, but

also more emphasis on caring for the adults in the schools as well as the children, so

that the schools became happy and professionally fulfilling places to work.

None of this was easy. Local Authorities are political entities as well as providers of

services. Internal conflicts and external turf wars were often exacerbated by

national policies that promote inter-school competition. A Steering Committee

involving national government and local representatives got locked into conflicts

over the disposition of the budget. A committee of leaders of the ten authorities

became fractious whenever it was presented with disturbing data or with concerns

about lack of progress. While six of the authorities were willing to change roles and

responsibilities, two others accommodated the new language of shared

responsibility for improvement without making any real changes in practice. But over time, with persistence of effort, relationships improved, some personnel changed, ideas and strategies started to be shared between schools as well as within them, and the authorities even began to commit to some joint delivery of services.

The impact of the GMC is inspiring other systems to adopt similar strategies. For example, in neighboring Wales, after a review conducted in 2013 by the internationally influential body known as OECD (The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) had found that the nation's educational performance was weak, particularly among learners from low-income families, a national initiative focused on getting schools across the country's 22 strong but very independent local authorities to work more closely and effectively together (OECD, 2014). By sharing expertise among schools, between schools and their local communities, and between national and local government, the program has posted significant gains even in the first year (BBC Wales, 2015).

The strategies adopted in Manchester, and now in Wales, define the essence of *Leading From the Middle*. But this term didn't arise in the UK. It first emerged in a system-wide project with ten school districts that the other author of this article (Andy Hargreaves) carried out with his colleague Henry Braun in Ontario, Canada.

Ontario District-led Reforms

Ontario has undertaken one of the world's best-known large-scale educational reform initiatives. The most publicized parts of this systemic reform, involving more than 5000 schools, have been its focus on raising the bar and narrowing the achievement gap in tested literacy and mathematics and on increasing the rates of high school completion. The design and implementation of this reform by a "guiding coalition" of political and professional forces was complemented by strong support to enable districts to be successful in achieving the desired results (Campbell, Osmond-Johnson, Lieberman, & Sohn, 2015).

A less well known part of the reform agenda was driven by the province's 72 school districts and their system leaders. In 2005, the government gave the districts an initial investment of $25m to design and implement a strategy to improve learning and achievement for students with special educational needs that would also benefit all students. One system leader described this change as "leading from the middle." After four years of this reform, the literacy achievement gap between students with special needs and other students had narrowed in reading and especially in writing.

In a retrospective study of the architecture and impact of this initiative conducted between 2009 and 2012, our research team from Boston College undertook ten representative case studies of Ontario school districts, including surveys of teachers' and principals' self-reported changes in their practice (Hargreaves & Braun, 2012).

On closed-ended survey items, there were high levels of agreement with statements that there was now greater collaboration among staff, more joint planning, and

broader acceptance of collective responsibility for all students. Teachers reported increased uses of differentiated instruction, more analysis and discussion of data to pinpoint needed interventions, greater cooperation between special education resource teachers and classroom teachers in relation to all students who struggled rather than only those with official identifications, and more use of assistive technologies for students with learning disabilities. Intensive site visits in all 10 districts corroborated these results and also revealed greater collaboration between curriculum and special education departments within districts that sometimes amounted to total integration. In general, educators reported a large movement from a culture of "my students" to "our students".

It was district leaders who drove this strategy. They took a counterintuitive approach of providing identical funding to all 72 districts, irrespective of their size. In a province where many districts were quite small and where even small amounts of extra resources could therefore make a great difference, this built a critical mass of district support. As one system leader put it, smaller districts could "be a full participant and not just attend meetings and listen to the big boards talk about how great their research project was". Larger districts were eventually persuaded to participate with their smaller counterparts through appeals to their historic symbolic status and the contribution they could make to the collective good of the province's students.

Responsibility for planning and implementation was devolved to a core team of six

key staff (retired district leaders and superintendents of curriculum or special education) who jointly developed project goals, designed an implementation strategy and monitored participation and results. They did this by constantly connecting with and circulating among the districts, making necessary changes and refinements as they amassed evidence on what was working and what was not.

Like the GMC, there was a belief among district leaders that in a province where one in four schoolchildren were born outside of Canada, communities and districts were diverse and distinct and not amenable to one-size-fits all strategies.

- In a district where high numbers of children come from new immigrant families, the project focused on early literacy initiatives like a summer head-start program for students new to the region, and a "snuggle up and read" program involving parents or other family members.

- In a district serving a large student population of Old-Order German-origin Mennonites who belong to a community characterized by systems of mutual aid, a commitment to collective self-sufficiency, the wearing of traditional dress, and respectful behavior towards elders, there were tendencies for children to leave school early to work on the farms, or, in the case of girls, to get married and have children. Standard efforts to enforce school attendance and improve high school completion would only have prompted families to move to other parts of their rural network throughout North America. So

school leaders engaged with Mennonite culture by, for instance, using the community's agricultural products for children's lunches, meeting parents on street corners, carrying home their shopping and building relationships to shift perceptions about the value of formal education.

- A remote rural district serving just 24 schools across an area the size of France, had struggled with how to raise expectations for the 40% of children from Aboriginal families (known in Canada as First Nations communities). Some educators had believed that children from these communities could not learn, could barely speak, and mainly needed an emotionally safe and caring environment. The district's response was to coach teachers to use more specific, differentiated and culturally appropriate teaching strategies, and to examine examples of student work among colleagues to demonstrate possibilities for student and teacher success.

Like the GMC, the Ontario special education project also stressed collective cross-district responsibility for all students' success. All 72 districts were involved. Collective responsibility began with teachers across grade levels and with special education and regular classroom assignments taking responsibility for struggling students and their progress together. The districts exercised collective responsibility too in how they shared strategies transparently at annual retreats where they presented storefronts of their practices and results, in how they communicated with the steering committee, and in how they were connected by

their team of mentors and monitors who were ensuring that intentions were being converted into action. These mentors and monitors did not have hierarchical supervisory authority over the districts and their leaders. These respected peers acted as a "third party" force responsible for improvement, system learning and challenge, where needed, to existing practice.

Ontario's special education reform was not just implemented by district leaders and special education superintendents like any other initiative. It was devised and driven by them. At the very beginning, the Executive Director of the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) and a small group of his associates who acted on behalf of the 72 district leaders, pointed out to the Ministry of Education that it had already allocated significant resources to other groups such as the teachers' unions, and CODE therefore requested resources and authority of its own to lead improvements in special education.

Though some feared the district leaders and their organization might fly off at a tangent from Ministry of Education policy, these leaders sought out many ways to integrate their own efforts with central government directions. The Ministry itself took a clear role in steering (but not micromanaging) this district-driven change. It stated that the CODE special education project must address issues of underachievement and the need to narrow the achievement gap, and that the project should be consistent with the guiding philosophy of a 2005 provincial report called *Education for All* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). This report advocated

Universal Design for Learning strategies where changes that were seen as essential for some students should be valuable for all students. It also promoted collaborative cultures of collective responsibility for all students' success. CODE reached out to senior leaders from other provincial initiatives such as the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and districts used every opportunity to "piggyback" on to other system initiatives.

Ontario's special education reform created a change design that would impact the education of all students across the system. It drove change from the middle instead of only mediating it from the top. And instead of expecting districts to adopt uniform responses to a centralized reform strategy, the reform generated and galvanized local creativity and energy in order to respond flexibly to the diversity of local needs and circumstances.

Building on its improvements in literacy and high school graduation, and on the success of *Leading From the Middle*, Ontario is moving further forward to pursue broader, bolder goals that include achievement and equity in 21st Century skills, arts, sciences and citizenship; and also greater wellbeing in mental, emotional and physical health (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). The Boston College team is now working with the ten districts to lead from the middle, for the province, in relation to increasing students' and teachers' engagement, promoting their wellbeing and building positive, diverse identities among them.

Conclusion

In recent years, in too many countries, school districts have been driven to distraction and to near-destruction by top-down changes that have undermined or bypassed their authority and also the communities they serve. There is clear evidence that our districts can and should be a big part of a better future for our children, if they are willing to embrace changes in their thinking and practice.

If we want success on a considerable scale, this cannot be achieved if districts continue to act independently of one another. Leading *from* the Middle, not just *in* the middle, can use the power of local solutions to diverse problems in an environment where schools work with schools and districts work with districts, as they exercise collective initiative and responsibility for all students' success. This kind of leadership needn't be confined to districts and can encompass networks and other kinds of partnerships as well (Fullan & Rincón-Gallardo, Forthcoming). But collective responsibility is not just something districts should ask others to undertake. It is something that districts now have to take on themselves.

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