CHAPTER ONE

The Starting Point

So hope for a great sea-change....
It means once in a lifetime that justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme.

—Seamus Heaney

Where are we in large-scale reform? It is a bit unfair to characterize the best success as incremental inertia, but in terms of sustainability, that label is not too far off the mark. In the first part of this chapter, I consider examples of large-scale reform that have been successful, concluding that progress has been made but that it is neither deep nor sustainable. I also identify some reasons why we should be concerned about the inadequacies of these strategies.

APPARENT SUCCESS

Nearly all of the success stories involve improvements in literacy and numeracy at the elementary level, with some closing of the gap between high- and low-performing schools. The findings are consistent across many studies. Togneri and Anderson’s (2003) study of
success in five high-poverty districts identified six strategies for improvement. These districts

1. Acknowledged publicly poor performance and sought solutions (building the will for reform)
2. Focused intensively on improving instruction and achievement
3. Built a systemwide framework and infrastructure to support instruction
4. Redefined and redistributed leadership at all levels of the district
5. Made professional development relevant and useful
6. Recognized there were no quick fixes. (p. 13)

In another study of four successful high-poverty districts, Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy (2002) found that these districts in comparison with other districts

1. Focused on achievement, standards, and instructional practice
2. Created concrete accountability systems in relation to results
3. Focused on the lowest-performing schools
4. Adopted districtwide curricular and instructional approaches
5. Established districtwide professional development and support for consistent implementation
6. Drove reform into the classrooms by defining the role for central offices of guiding, supporting, and improving instruction at the building level
7. Committed themselves to data-driven decision making and instruction
8. Started the reform at the elementary level
9. Provided intensive instruction in reading and math to middle and high schools students. (p. 5)
Similarly, and at a more operational school level, a study by the Council of Chief School Officers (2002) found that school principals who were successful employed nine improvement strategies by

1. Setting high expectations for all students
2. Sharing leadership and staying engaged
3. Encouraging collaboration among staff
4. Using assessment data to support student success
5. Keeping the focus on students
6. Addressing barriers to learning
7. Reinforcing classroom learning at home
8. Employing systems for identifying interventions
9. Defining special education as the path to success in the general education program. (p. 8)

In all of the above cases, leadership at the school and district levels was identified as crucial to success. As consistent as these findings seem, there are many problems with them, but let us first consider other large-scale reforms.

The most celebrated case of large-scale reform is the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (NLNS) in England. We had the privilege of evaluating the strategy over a 5-year period, from 1997 to 2002 (Earl, Levin, Leithwood, Fullan, & Watson, 2003). The main elements of the implementation strategy were summarized by Michael Barber (2002), head of the government initiative:

- A nationally prepared project plan for both literacy and numeracy, setting out actions, responsibilities, and deadlines through to 2002
- A substantial investment sustained over at least 6 years and skewed toward those schools that need most help
- A project infrastructure involving national direction from the Standards and Effectiveness Unit, 15 regional directors, and over 300 expert consultants at the local level for each of the two strategies
Leadership & Sustainability

- An expectation that every class will have a daily math lesson and daily literacy hour
- A detailed teaching programme covering every school year for children from ages 5 to 11
- An emphasis on early intervention and catch-up for pupils who fall behind
- A professional development programme designed to enable every primary school teacher to learn to understand and use proven best practices in both curriculum areas
- The appointment of over 2,000 leading math teachers and hundreds of expert literacy teachers who have the time and skill to model best practice for their peers
- The provision of “intensive support” to circa half of all schools where the most progress is required
- A major investment in books for schools (over 23 million new books in the system since May 1997)
- The removal of barriers to implementation (especially a huge reduction in prescribed curriculum content outside the core subjects)
- Regular monitoring and extensive evaluation by our national inspection agency, OFSTED
- A national curriculum for initial teacher training requiring all providers to prepare new primary schoolteachers to teach the daily math lesson and the literacy hour
- A problem-solving philosophy involving early identification of difficulties as they emerge and the provision of rapid solutions or intervention where necessary
- The provision of extra after school, weekend, and holiday booster classes for those who need extra help to reach the standard. (pp. 8–9)

England used a combination of “pressure and support,” or what we now call “accountability and capacity building,” to mobilize leadership for literacy and mathematics. New literacy and math leadership roles were established at the school, district, regional, and national levels and later were supplemented by direct professional development for school principals and initial teacher education. So, leadership was central to success. Capacity building involves developing the collective ability—dispositions, skills, knowledge, motivation, and resources—to act together to bring about positive change.
The results were impressive, but tell two stories. Using 11-year-olds as the marker, Figure 1.1 shows the percentage of pupils achieving proficiency (Levels 4 and 5 in the English system).

First, the results are remarkable. Within a 4-year period (1997–2000), literacy and math proficiency increased from slightly over 60% to about 75%. This in 20,000 schools! Second, performance
plateaued in 2000 and has remained at that level for the past 3 years even though the initial strategy has become, if anything, more sophisticated.

Before throwing one more spanner into the works, let’s take critical stock. First, by focusing directly on literacy and mathematics with appropriate pressure and support, one can get a boost of improvement.

Second, even with enormous effort, there is only a minority of schools and districts deeply engaged in these strategies, especially if we use “closing the gap” as the main criterion.

Third, the results plateau well below acceptable levels. After a sharp increase between 1997 and 2000, the results have remained at the same level for the past 3 years.

Fourth, are even the good results sustainable? In a word, NO. The strategies have required tremendous energy and supervision, which in their own right cannot be sustained for long (burnout, turnover, overload take their toll). Related to this, motivation to continue was evident as long as results were improving; what happens when improvement plateaus and it takes the same great effort just to stand still? There is no chance that the strategies described to this point could result in widespread, sustainable reform.

Fifth, do the results represent deep learning? There is no indication that “engagement of students in learning” has significantly increased just because there are more students who can read and are numerate. Advances in cognitive science and in what citizens of the future need in a complex, global society show how deep the learning must be. Guy Claxton’s (2002) framework of Building Learning Power is a case in point:

Developing learning power means working on four aspects of student learning. The first task is to help them become more resilient: able to lock onto learning and to resist distractions either from outside or within. The second is helping them become more resourceful: able to draw on a wide range of learning methods and strategies as appropriate. The third is building the ability to be reflective: to think profitably about learning and themselves as learners. And the fourth task is to make them capable of being reciprocal: making use of relationships in the most productive, enjoyable and responsible way. (p. 17; emphasis in original)
David Hargreaves (2003) also makes the point that the school curriculum is seriously out of step with what is needed in present and future society, where new knowledge and skills are at a premium:

The ability to learn how to learn and other meta-cognitive or “thinking” skills; the ability to learn on the job and in teams; the ability to cope with ambiguous situations and unpredictable problems; the ability to communicate well verbally, not just in writing; and the ability to be creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial. (p. 30)

Similarly, Bereiter (2002) argues forcefully that we need far deeper learning than hitherto imagined for both students and teachers. Indeed, as we shall see, “deep learning” is one of the eight elements of sustainability.

Sixth, and finally, note that in all cases, the strategy is heavily centrally directed at the district or state levels (one group above proudly claimed that it “drove reforms into the classrooms”). Soon, we will see that centrally driven reforms can be a necessary first start (when performance is seriously unacceptable) but can never carry the day of sustainability.

To nudge our thinking in the direction of sustainability, I take Michael Barber’s response to the fact that an apparently successful strategy was plateauing. Figure 1.2 displays the framework he used to characterize the evolution of needed strategies for reform.

Barber (2002) argued that some conditions for reform can be described on a continuum from “knowledge poor” (quality knowledge is not being generated and accessed on an ongoing basis) to “knowledge rich.” The other dimension is whether the strategy is centrally driven or is based on local capacity or judgment. The result is a helpful (but an incomplete) transition toward a sustainability paradigm. Interpreting the figure itself, we can say there was a time when teachers worked autonomously “behind the classroom door” (there is still much of that). As a loosely coupled system, it can be described as “uninformed professional judgment.” There were some excellent teachers, but there was no culture in place to systematically extend and deepen quality teaching.

As anxiety about the performance of schools became more public in the 1980s—think “A Nation at Risk” in the United States—new accountability schemes were introduced, but these were not
based on sound or comprehensive knowledge: hence, uninformed prescription.

As evidence accumulated about how to improve student achievement (both with respect to curriculum and instruction and in terms of change strategies), some jurisdictions locked on to a more centrally driven (and supported) set of strategies. They did their homework, with the result being “informed prescription.” England’s NLNS is a prime example. Barber (2002), then, acknowledges that such prescription, no matter how wise, cannot solve the leveling-off problem. To go beyond initial plateauing, one needs a great deal of “informed professional judgment.”

For my own part, it is important to clarify from the work on professional learning communities that informed professional judgment must be understood to be a collective quality, not just an individual one (i.e., groups of teachers and others create a system of ongoing collective deliberation and development); and it must have strong external connections to the wider environment of knowledge, not just collaboration within. Furthermore, such cultures are not particularly
congenial; they are demanding cultures as people continually press for better results.

Still, there is a larger dilemma. In an era of urgency and accountability, what happens if you invest in and give over to informed professional judgment but it turns out the group does not have the capacity (resources, skills, culture) to act effectively? Won’t such an investment drift into uninformed judgment? As we move toward sustainability in the next section, we need to keep this tension in mind. It is the classic centralization-decentralization dilemma. Any solution that aspires toward sustainability must reconcile this dilemma.

**DANGER POINTS**

I said there was one more spanner, and it comes in the form of an intriguing book by a professor of management, William Ouchi (2003). The gist of what I am going to end up saying is that in the press to do what’s best for students and in the complexity of so doing, it is easy to get the strategy wrong, especially when it comes to learning lessons from examples of apparent success.

In *Making Schools Work* (Ouchi, 2003), the main argument is presented as follows:

Ouchi’s 2001–2002 study examined innovative school systems in Edmonton (Canada), Seattle, and Houston, and compared them with the three largest traditional school systems: New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Researchers discovered that the schools that consistently performed best also had the most decentralized management systems, in which autonomous principals—not administrators in a central office—controlled school budgets and personnel hiring policies. They were fully responsible and fully accountable for the performance of their schools. With greater freedom and flexibility to shape their educational programs, hire specialists as needed, and generally determine the direction of their school, the best principals will act as entrepreneurs, says Ouchi. Those who do poorly are placed under the supervision of successful principals, who assume responsibility for the failing schools. (Dust jacket copy)

Using standard achievement tests, Ouchi (2003) shows that schools in the three innovative districts have moved ahead in their
own right and in relation to the comparison districts. It is also the case, as Ouchi acknowledges, that many schools are not moving forward. Ouchi (2003) then proceeds to reveal the “seven keys to success.” What is called for, he says, “is to uproot the existing top-down way of doing things and replace it with huge, revolutionary change” (pp. 13–14). The seven keys to success are

1. Every principal is an entrepreneur.
2. Every school controls its own budget.
3. Everyone is accountable for student performance and for budgets.
4. Everyone delegates authority to those below.
5. There is a burning focus on student achievement.
6. Every school is a community of learners.
7. Families have real choices among a variety of unique schools. (p. 14)

There are two issues for me. One is the problem of misinterpreting the lessons; the other is the unlikelihood that the model itself will produce sustainability. Relative to the former, to the extent Ouchi is on the right track, those looking at the lessons might get the message wrong. There is a growing problem in large-scale reform; namely, the terms travel well, but the underlying conceptualization and thinking do not.

This is an age-old issue in knowledge dissemination. There is a great deal of tacit and in-depth contextual knowledge that would be required to understand the lessons at work. For example, one could easily conclude that site-based management or decentralization is the answer. Ouchi, in fact, claims that both top-down and bottom-up energies are required. Furthermore, issues of holding people accountable and building communities of learners within and across scores of schools are enormously complex.

The second matter concerns doubts about whether the model can work on a large, sustainable scale. Ouchi does not use the terms capacity or capacity building in his entire book. They are not in the index. And autonomy to act is not the same thing as capacity. There is no chance that large-scale reform will happen, let alone stick,
unless capacity building is a central component of the strategy for improvement. Related to this, we now know that capacity building throughout the system at all levels must be developed in concert, and to do this will require powerful new system forces. Finally, for the system as a whole to change (a key part of my sustainability argument), you must have school and district leaders who are committed to interacting laterally with other schools and districts in order to learn from each other and to identify with the larger purpose of educational reform.

Failure to act in this direction will result in continued crude or incomplete attempts at large-scale reform, which makes little difference while wasting enormous energy. U.S. President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reform act is a case in point. NCLB requires all states to have an achievement-driven system in which “annual yearly progress” in student achievement is documented and reported publicly for every school in each state, with a sequence of escalating consequences for those schools not improving. There is little investment in capacity building and it places people in a high-alert dependency mode, jumping from one solution to another in a desperate attempt to comply. Any minor gains are bound to be outweighed by a system that guarantees superficiality, temporary solutions, and cynicism in the face of impossible goals (see Popham, 2004, for a devastating critique of No Child Left Behind).

A more palatable but incomplete example is the decade-long (1990s) experience with whole-school reform models. Whole-school models (Success for All being the most well-known) with proven track records were validated and funded for dissemination to schools and districts interested in adopting the models. The idea was that these high-quality, school-focused solutions would carry the day, but here was a recipe for nonsustainability even when models were well implemented, because of a failure to consider the kind of “whole-system” capacity building that would be required (see Fullan, 2004, for a critique).

In short, we need a radically new mind-set for reconciling the seemingly intractable dilemmas fundamental for sustainable reform: top-down versus bottom-up, local and central accountability, informed prescription and informed professional judgment, improvement that keeps being replenished. We need, in other words, to tackle the problem of sustainability head-on.