

March 2, 2007

Interactive Innovations 2007

We do have an incredible province. Wednesday night through Friday, the Interactive Innovations conference bound BC as a learning community. Conference sites hundreds of kilometers apart shared a common agenda focused on student achievement and learning. World class speakers addressed audiences of teachers, parents, principals and leaders dedicated to improving the life chances of our students through improved learning and achievement.

Let me say some thanks – first to Audrey Hobbs-Johnson, conference organizer and program chair. She is assisted at the five BC conference sites by Lynn Green and Trudeau Andrews in Vancouver, Bonnie Chappel in Prince George, Pat Dooley in Nelson, Bev Rundell and Juleen McElgunn in Kelowna, and Ann Boyd and Irene Corman in Victoria. Thank you all and thank you to the unbelievable number of volunteers, presenters and others for making this such an outstanding event.

I know of no other place in the world that has the architecture of Innovations. Imagine – a province as diverse as ours, both demographically and geographically, that can weave a tapestry of a learning community over these past few days – cutting edge international presenters teaching us in BC how to serve our students better.

So...over 1,400 educators, some from Alberta and the Yukon, joined in this professional adventure...and it is not over. Audrey and her team will archive the learning tools arising from these few days so they live on for our future use. Let me talk about just a few things that struck me.

Patrick and Fred Renihan spoke on Thursday morning of the need to be relevant to today's learners. They highlighted the importance of membership and engagement – the reciprocity of the teaching and learning dichotomy. Ever our BC favorites, the poems about moral purpose highlight the calling of teaching and learning.

The gift of technology brought Andy Hargreaves to us from Boston. He built on our familiar BC theme of the value of networks – the strong helping the weak, schools supporting other schools. I found his concept of capacity building through trusting professionalism particularly compelling. Professionals are not autonomous, isolated and lonely but connect with a common purpose and endeavor to improve student achievement and narrow gaps for vulnerable students. Capacity building is a central theme.

Michael Fullan posed a question to Hargreaves - "How does BC take the next steps in improving student achievement?" That was particularly relevant to me, as the Ministry Superintendents and members of the partner organizations had spent Wednesday with Fullan seeking his advice on precisely that issue. The day was very fruitful, and Dr. Fullan gave us much to think about. Allow me to talk a little about our day with Michael.

Dr. Fullan is recognized as the leading expert on educational reform and improvement. A prolific author, Dr. Fullan's most recent book entitled Turnaround Leadership (2006) is a "must read" for anyone focussed and involved in educational leadership. This spring his newest book, The New Meaning of Educational Change, (Fouter Ed.) will be released.

Dr. Fullan is consulting with several countries on their change and improvement agenda. However, the

system change he is most intimately involved in is the improvement agenda of the Ontario government.

The focus of our discussion with Dr. Fullan was to look at his key strategies for improvement and to discuss these strategies in the BC context. We began the day by reviewing our achievement agenda established in 2001 and tried to reflect some of our initial successes and the barriers to achievement and improvement that we have encountered over the past 6 years.

In his book Turnaround Leadership, Fullan identifies ten key elements for addressing turnaround situations:

1. Define closing the gap as the overarching goal. This means decreasing the gap “between high and low performers – boys, girls, ethnic groups, poor, rich, special education”. (p. 45)
2. Attend initially to the three basics. The basics here are literacy, numeracy and social well-being. These basics are featured in all of our accountability contracts.
3. Be driven by tapping into people’s dignity and sense of respect. As educators, we have a duty to respect students even if it interferes with accepted behaviours of colleagues and others. (p. 50)
4. Ensure that the best people are working on the problem.
5. Recognize that all successful strategies are socially based and action oriented – change by doing rather than change by elaborate planning. The plan is not the product or end result you are striving for.
6. Assume that lack of capacity is the initial problem and then work on it continuously. Capacity building has to be central in all your development.
7. Stay the course through continuity of good direction by leveraging leadership. Leaders developing other leaders is at the heart of sustainability. (p. 62)
8. Build internal accountability linked to external accountability. Use the assessment information you have to continuously build toward the targets set within the school and district.
9. Establish conditions for the evolution of positive pressure. Reduce “the distractors”.
10. Use the previous nine strategies to build public confidence. Constant attacks on the system in the media destroys public confidence which leads to parents selecting private schools, not supporting the efforts of educators and therefore not supportive of further investments.

Based on these ten elements, Dr. Fullan discussed the components he has established as a framework for improvement and reform for Ontario. Of significance is his focus on eliminating distractors. Ontario teacher unions are on side with the achievement agenda and using assessment for learning. Secondly, the government is very focussed on capacity building, with a focus on results. This is not about the traditional professional development strategies we are familiar with. It is more about educators collaborating with each other; discussing techniques, pedagogy, effective intervention and success.

Fullan suggests professional development is often a great way to change. Real improvement happens when teachers, principals and others can have these discussions in the setting in which they work.

The day covered many topics. The result was a commitment by those attending to keep the dialogue going, to find ways for us to build capacity and to develop strategies that will increase the life chances of all BC children.

Dr. Fullan promised to remain our critical friend as we move forward with our continued focus on improving student learning and the life chances of each of our students one child at a time. We are building an incredible community of teachers and leaders in BC. Our children will have great futures – we will guarantee that.



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