

March 9, 2007

Ah Hah!

Have you had an “ah hah” moment? It’s one of those times when you slap the palm of your hand against your forehead and experience some new thinking. As I mentioned before, a group of 12 of us - ministry staff and partners - spent a day last Wednesday in dialogue with Michael Fullan regarding ideas to move this province ahead in continuing improvement to student achievement. Then I had the privilege of attending the Interactive Innovations Conference and listening to excellent thinkers and educators culminating, of course, with Fullan. It was clear from his closing keynote that his thinking had both shaped us and been shaped by us – a true critical friend.

What is different for me in my thinking as a result of the “ah hah”? Fullan talked about the evolution of his own thinking from a model for improvement that included three components:

Accountability - Pressure & Support - Capacity Building

Fullan’s experiences in Ontario persuaded him that this model for improvement resulted in undue focus on Pressure and less than desirable focus on Support. He concluded that pressure was already included in the Accountability piece and support was, indeed, Capacity Building. Fullan’s frame became two dimensional.

Accountability - Capacity Building

I thought about this within the BC context. I think we have accountability about right. We have a limited number of measures of student performance that include low stakes tests at grade 4, 7 and graduation program exams at grades 10, 11 with somewhat higher stakes optional tests in Grade 12. We have data that we use as evidence of individual success and system

performance trends. The Accountability Framework includes Accountability Contracts that result from school improvement planning. We have district reviews to assess success in implementation of accountability contracts. Our Accountability Framework is under constant adjustment and review, but I think we have found the right balance on the tight-loose continuum (another concept mentioned by Fullan).

Now the “ah hah”. We have work we can do on Capacity Building. That is the work that holds great promise for moving student achievement to the next level. We have already decided to bring greater focus to individual student success and work to help every student be successful. Now if we work together as teachers, principals, parents, superintendents and trustees to develop our capacity to accomplish that goal, we will see gains in student achievement.

We (being the Ministry) have not been very involved in this aspect of work. We have taken the view that school districts and schools are responsible for building capacity to improve student achievement. Remember our description of the last few years. The Ministry is responsible for:

- Setting standards
- Measuring performance
- Reporting results

What if we add to this, “Building capacity to get results.”? Fullan described the important work Ontario is doing in supporting schools and school districts to build capacity for results. He also urged some cautions.

- “Having a heavy preponderance of external input and control will fail to build internal capacity and motivation.”
- “Under conditions of external control teachers either comply (thus getting short term gains) or if they have

options (often better teachers) leave.”

- “Initial focus on control reduces gross inefficiencies, and reverses decline, but only initially – from awful to adequate and then, at best, plateau.”

A ministry presence in capacity building must be sensitive to these concerns. Capacity building cannot be done to anyone. Capacity must be built with teachers and principals in schools to assist those working directly with the students to meet their learning needs.

I am also mindful that there are many schools, school districts and partner organizations engaged in capacity building throughout BC. In many cases their work is making a significant difference. But, I think a provincial focus on these activities can increase the scope of capacity building and improve the success of students, one student at a time. We are well positioned with existing structures to pursue this initiative. Our new division within the Ministry, the Achievement Division with the Superintendents of Student Achievement, can take a central role with new initiatives and coordination of ongoing activities.

You heard it here – my “ah hah” involves the Ministry in system wide capacity building aimed at making every student successful – expect to see a Ministry focus in this area.

But like the K-tel ads on TV, that is not all. Fullan also talked about his eight-point plan for tri-level (province, district and school) reform. Paraphrased they are:

1. Establish a guiding coalition – Clear thinking, influential persons with a shared vision for improving student achievement.
2. Remove Distractors – Minimize the impact of disputes and things that really do not matter.
3. Establish a responsible agency (the literacy and numeracy secretariat in Ontario) to manage the Accountability and Capacity Building framework.
4. Negotiate Achievement targets – Meaningful targets in the context of a school that balance reasonable and “stretch” expectations.

5. Build capacity – as focused on above.
6. Enhance and target resources – on things that matter, resources of the Ministry and those of school districts.
7. Evolve positive pressure – incent initiatives in a supportive manner that result in voluntary acceptance.
8. Connect the dots – Make sense of the work – How does a focus on literacy, early learning, healthy living, safe schools and other priorities fit into success for all?

And one final thought. Fullan talked about capacity building in the frame of professional learning. In a yet to be released book Fullan says, “It is a wise and courageous politician who declares that capacity building is more important than accountability and it will take a wise and courageous teacher union leader to declare that professional learning communities take precedence over individual teacher autonomy...”. Speaking to this notion, Fullan explained that professional learning happens best in a community of teachers – the responsibility for learning is not to self but to other teachers in the community. The social power and individual fulfillment of being part of a professional learning group or network is a critical component. We will do our capacity building together, not alone. Barry Sullivan told us in [A Legacy for Learners](#), “Learning is both a social process and individual process.” Our capacity building will bring us together.

Expect these things:

- A focus on individual success
- A ministry role in supporting capacity building
- An organized strategy to improve achievement one student at a time.
- Development of learning teams of teachers, principals and superintendents.



Emery Dosdall, Ed D
Deputy Minister of Education