Choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform

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Introducing the drivers for whole system reform

‘Whole system reform’ is the name of the game and ‘drivers’ are those policy and strategy levers that have the least and best chance of driving successful reform. A ‘wrong driver’ then is a deliberate policy force that has little chance of achieving the desired result, while a ‘right driver’ is one that ends up achieving better measurable results for students. Whole system reform is just that – 100 per cent of the system – a whole state, province, region or entire country. This paper examines those drivers typically chosen by leaders to accomplish reform, critiques their inadequacy, and offers an alternative set of drivers that have been proven to be more effective at accomplishing the desired goal, which I express as

... the moral imperative of raising the bar (for all students) and closing the gap (for lower performing groups) relative to higher order skills and competencies required to be successful world citizens.

As an advance organiser I suggest four criteria – all of which must be met in concert – which should be used for judging the likely effectiveness of a driver or set of drivers. Specifically, do the drivers, sooner than later,

1. foster intrinsic motivation of teachers and students;
2. engage educators and students in continuous improvement of instruction and learning;
3. inspire collective or team work; and
4. affect all teachers and students – 100 per cent?

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Thus intrinsic motivation, instructional improvement, teamwork, and ‘allness’ are the crucial elements for whole system reform. Many systems not only fail to feature these components but choose drivers that actually make matters worse.

The key to system-wide success is to situate the energy of educators and students as the central driving force. This means aligning the goals of reform and the intrinsic motivation of participants. Intrinsic energy derives from doing something well that is important to you and to those with whom you are working. Thus policies and strategies must generate the very conditions that make intrinsic motivation flourish. This is as basic as the human condition. After minimal needs are met what turns most people on is being effective at something that is personally meaningful, and which makes a contribution to others as well as to society as a whole. Personal contributions are all the more gratifying when they are part of a team effort melding personal and social goals. Policies and strategies that do not foster such strong intrinsic motivation across the whole system cannot be a source of whole system reform. Furthermore, strategies that do not develop increased capability (the skills to do something well) are similarly destined to failure. In other words, both strong motivation and enhanced skills on a very large scale are required.
The interest in whole system reform has been fueled recently by better analyses of how different countries are faring in international benchmark comparisons. OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 results received the strongest media coverage ever as it released its latest results on 7 December 2010 (OECD, 2010a). At the same time McKinsey and Company published its insightful analysis of how ‘improved school systems keep getting better’ (Mourshed et al, 2010). The McKinsey report examined 20 entities (countries or sub-regions of countries) including developing countries going from ‘poor to fair’, ‘fair to good’, ‘good to great’, and ‘great to excellent’.

In both the PISA and McKinsey reports the top five countries in literacy, science and mathematics are Korea, Finland, Hong Kong, Singapore and Canada (Shanghai scored best on literacy but is not a country, and is likely not to be very representative of China as a whole). In this paper I use the United States and Australia as examples. Both countries have recently launched ambitious national education reform initiatives. Both have acknowledged a strong sense of urgency for reform – the US because it has fallen steadily from one of the top-performing systems in the world to its current ranking of 17th, 31st and 23rd in reading, mathematics and science respectively, according to the most recent PISA results (OECD, 2010a). Australia has fared better, at 9th, 15th and 10th respectively, but has stagnated over the last decade.

The combination of lack of progress in many of the English speaking countries, intra-country economic and social problems, and global competition has created a transparent sense of urgency among political leaders to get better whole system reform results as quickly as possible. In other words, policy makers are desperate for ‘drivers that work’.

An effective driver is a policy (and related strategies) that actually produces better results across the system. An effective driver is not something that sounds plausible; it is not something that can be justified by a cavalier (as distinct from a carefully considered) reference to research. Nor is it an urgent goal (such as moral purpose); rather, drivers that are effective generate a concerted and accelerating force for progress toward the goals of reform. An effective driver is one that achieves better measurable results with students.

The four ‘wrong’ drivers I discuss in this paper are compelling on the surface, and have a lot of face-value appeal for people with urgent problems. They will be hard to dislodge. The politics will be fierce because leaders want immediate results, and are susceptible to what look like plausible solutions but turn out to be silver bullets. I believe, however, that we will see some breakthroughs soon, for several interrelated reasons:

- the evidence that the wrong drivers don’t work is increasingly clear and compelling;
- there are positive alternative solutions in play that do work and are also clear and compelling; and, most encouragingly
- it is almost inevitable that those most committed to reform, and most perplexed by the lack of progress, will figure it out because they are used to solving complex social problems. I expect, for example, that Bill and Melinda Gates, and key political and policy leaders in the US and Australia will be open to the arguments and evidence put forward in these pages.

In this paper I am only interested in drivers that

- evidently cause whole system improvements;
- are measurable in practice and in results; and
- for which a clear case can be made that strategy X produces result Y.

By contrast, an ineffective driver would be one that

- while sounding good actually does not produce the results it seeks;
- may make matters worse; and

The right drivers are effective because they work directly on changing the culture.
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...on closer scrutiny can never have the impact it purports to produce.

In the rush to move forward, leaders, especially from countries that have not been progressing, tend to choose the wrong drivers. Such ineffective drivers fundamentally miss the target. There are four main ‘wrong driver’ culprits that I discuss with their matched pairs that refer to the more effective alternative. In all cases choosing a combination of the drivers makes matters significantly worse (or better). The culprits are

1. **Accountability**: using test results, and teacher appraisal, to reward or punish teachers and schools vs capacity building;
2. **Individual teacher and leadership quality**: promoting individual vs group solutions;
3. **Technology**: investing in and assuming that the wonders of the digital world will carry the day vs instruction;
4. **Fragmented strategies** vs integrated or systemic strategies.

Although the four ‘wrong’ components have a place in the reform constellation, they can never be successful **drivers**. It is, in other words, a mistake to lead with them. Countries that do lead with them (efforts such as are currently underway in the US and Australia, for example) will fail to achieve whole system reform. Even worse, chances are that such strategies will cause backward movement relative to other countries that are using the right drivers. As we consider each of the four problem strategies, it is worth noting in advance that none of the top-performing countries in the world led their reforms with these four current favourites (although elements of the four components eventually take their proper place in the reform agenda).

I need to be clear here. The four ‘wrong drivers’ are not forever wrong. They are just badly placed as **lead drivers**. The four ‘right drivers’ – capacity building, group work, pedagogy, and ‘systemness’ – are the anchors of whole system reform. You don’t have to give up your affinity to accountability, individual quality, technology, and favored quality components of the reform package. Stated another way, I am not talking about presence or absence or even sequence, but rather **dominance**. Dominance is another word for saying what system leaders state and acknowledge as the anointed, explicitly articulated lead drivers. The encouraging news is that the judicious use of the four right drivers ends up accomplishing better the goals that those espousing the wrong drivers are seeking. And it does so in a fundamentally more powerful and sustainable manner.

The right drivers – capacity building, group work, instruction, and systemic solutions – are effective because they work directly on **changing the culture** of school systems (values, norms, skills, practices, relationships); by contrast the wrong drivers alter structure, procedures and other formal attributes of the system without reaching the internal substance of reform – and that is why they fail.

The glue that binds the effective drivers together is the underlying attitude, philosophy, and theory of action. The mindset that works for whole system reform is the one that inevitably generates individual and collective motivation and corresponding skills to transform the system.

The essence of this paper is that if you want to be successful at whole system reform, then base your dominant set of strategies on the four right drivers in combination. If you have a tendency to gravitate to one or more of the four wrong drivers you need to diminish their role proactively; know that the four underlying right drivers are what counts and make them prominent. The glue that binds the effective drivers together is the underlying attitude, philosophy, and theory of action. The mindset that works for whole system reform is the one that inevitably generates individual and collective motivation and corresponding skills to transform the system. It is okay to use the full constellation of eight drivers along the way, as...
long as you make sure the less effective four play a decidedly second fiddle role to the right four. This distinction is critical because the evidence is clear: the wrong four as drivers de-motivate the masses whose energy is required for success; the right four drivers do the opposite. Countries that are successful (increasingly on a sustained basis) have figured this out and will only get stronger. All systems need to shift toward the right constellation of drivers because this will give them success, and will result in global advances. Every country that gets better educationally becomes a better neighbour. The moral imperative in education is about the whole world advancing. Systems that embrace the four right drivers using the so-called wrong drivers in a supportive role can win at home as they win abroad.

Before turning to the four flawed drivers (and their more effective counterparts) we need to consider the national reforms currently being pursued in the United States and in Australia. These are big audacious efforts that I cannot do justice to in this brief paper but we can get a good appreciation of their profile and main elements.