

Building a Real Education Revolution: Unfinished business

by
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If you think that the Building the Education (BER) scheme that was championed by Julia Gillard as Education Minister represented a revolution in the education of Australia's youth, then think again. As the Executive Summary to the Report of the BER Implementation Task Force unambiguously states:

"In response to the global financial crisis, the Commonwealth announced in February 2009 the Nation Building and Jobs Plan, an economic stimulus package of \$42 billion. The largest component of the package was the Building the Education Revolution (BER) Program (the Program) which will invest \$16.2 billion in building and refurbishing primary and secondary school infrastructure by the time the Program is completed in 2011...

The primary goal of the BER program was to underpin economic activity in the construction sector through a period of significant global uncertainty. [emphasis added]"¹

The impact of the BER on student outcomes was, and is, not an important yardstick by which governments evaluate the value they got for taxpayers' \$16.2 billion investment.

The need to find out what actually improves school systems

A recent international research study by McKinsey & Company analysed "the experiences of 20 school systems from all parts of the globe that have achieved significant, sustained, and widespread gains, as measured by national and international standards of assessment."² It involved interviews with over 200 school system leaders and their staff as well as visits to each of the 20 school systems studied. In total, nearly 575 interventions aimed at improving school systems were identified in the study.

The study examined school systems that had achieved student outcome gains anywhere along the pathway from poor to fair, from fair to good, from good to great, and from great to excellent. In order to systematically position schools along the improvement pathway from poor to excellent, McKinsey developed "a universal scale of calibration...by normalizing several different international assessment scales of student outcomes discussed in the education literature".

The need for research such as McKinsey's is underlined by the finding that most of the leaders of improved school systems could not say why they had been successful in improving the school system of which they were a part. Many simply thought they had been lucky. School systems, it seems, are too big and too complex for thoughtful individual reflection to determine how they work and how they can be improved. Moreover, as McKinsey state in their introduction "almost every country has undertaken some form of school system reform during the past two decades, but very few have succeeded in improving their systems from poor to fair to good to great to excellent."

Interventions that improve student outcomes

What the McKinsey analysis revealed is that despite their very different social, economic, political and geographic contexts, all improving school systems appear to adopt a similar set of interventions, one that is appropriate to their stage of the journey from poor to excellent. This to not to say that context is not important, but it is secondary to aligning policy interventions to where a school system is in the journey from poor to excellent.

On the basis of what their study found actually works in practice, McKinsey offers the guidelines for improving school systems shown in Table 1:

TABLE 1:

Improvement journey	Poor to fair	Fair to good	Good to great	Great to excellent
Theme	<i>Achieving the basics of literacy and numeracy</i>	<i>Getting the foundations in place</i>	<i>Shaping the professional</i>	<i>Improving through peers and innovation</i>
Intervention cluster	<p>Providing motivation and scaffolding for low skill teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scripted teaching materials - Coaching on curriculum - Instructional time on task - School visits by centre - Incentives for high performance <p>Getting all schools to a minimum quality level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Outcome targets - Additional support for low performing schools - School infrastructure improvement - Provision of textbooks <p>Getting students in seats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expand school seats - Fulfil students' basic needs to raise attendance 	<p>Data and accountability foundation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transparency to schools and/or public on school performance - School inspections and inspections institutions <p>Financial and organisational foundation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Optimization of school and teacher volumes - Decentralizing financial and administrative rights - Increasing funding - Funding allocation model - Organizational Redesign <p>Pedagogical foundation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School model/streaming - Language of instruction 	<p>Raising calibre of entering teachers and principals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recruiting programs - Pre-service training - Certification requirements <p>Raising calibre of existing teachers and principals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In-service training programs - Coaching on practice - Career tracks - Teacher and community forums <p>School-based decision-making</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-evaluation - Independent and Specialized schools 	<p>Cultivating peer-led learning for teachers and principals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collaborative practice - Decentralizing pedagogical rights to schools & teachers - Rotation and secondment programs <p>Creating additional support mechanisms for professionals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Release professionals from admin burden by providing additional administrative staff <p>System-sponsored experimentation/ innovation across schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing additional funding for innovation - Sharing innovation from front-line to all schools

Source: Adapted from Exhibit 8 in the McKinsey research report.

While McKinsey found that a unique “intervention cluster” exists for each stage in the improvement journey, they also found that the following six interventions were common across all journeys:

1. Revising curriculum and standards;
2. Reviewing reward and remunerations structure;
3. Building technical skills of teachers and principals, often through group or cascaded training;
4. Assessing student learning;
5. Utilizing student data to guide delivery, and
6. Establishing policy documents and education laws.

Although the six interventions listed above occurred with equal frequency across all stages in the improvement journey they took different forms depending on the particular stage through which a school system was progressing.

The Australian Situation

Examination of Table 1 suggests that policy makers in Australia believe that our school systems still need interventions that are appropriate to the “poor to fair” and “fair to good” stages of the improvement journey. Recent policy interventions have included erecting new school buildings and increasing transparency of and accountability for school performance through the www.myschool.edu.au website.

It can be argued that many parts of the various state school systems in Australia warrant policy interventions aimed at moving them from good to great and from great to excellent. These higher level interventions must focus on raising the calibre of new and existing teachers and fostering school based decision-making systems; strengthening the professionalism of teaching and school leadership; encouraging peer-led learning; and central promotion of experimentation and dissemination of successful innovations.

McKinsey cite the Singapore school system as one that has made the transition from poor to great. The following two paragraphs are adapted from the report:

Singapore’s “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” program gave teachers greater freedom in classroom practice, and gave principals decision rights on school management matters. It introduced school clusters to create a peer-based forum for school leadership development and the sharing of effective teaching and learning practices across schools. It also changed its school inspection model, replacing the previous highly centralized model with a more collaborative one focused on self-assessment and quality assurance.

As the change progressed, Singapore worked intensively on strengthening the calibre of its teachers and principals so that they could make the best use of their greater freedoms. It established a system that accommodated three career tracks (Leadership, Teaching, and Senior Specialist), narrowed recruitment into teaching to the top one-third of each graduating cohort, expanded professional development to one hundred hours per year, and created mentorship pairings for school leaders. More recently it has focused on strengthening the networks of Professional Learning Communities in schools that

encourage teachers to collaborate with one other in reviewing and improving their classroom practice. In the words of one system leader, “As the skills of our educators rose, we needed to change our approach in how we managed them. We could no longer prescribe what they did, we had to treat them like professionals who had good judgment, knew their students well, and who could make their own decisions.”

Managing the improvement journey

Underpinning the journey from good to great and excellent is a loosening of central controls over school teaching and learning processes. McKinsey found that: “Systems on the journey from poor to fair, in general characterized by less skilled educators, tightly control teaching and learning processes from the center because minimizing variation across classrooms and schools is the core driver of performance improvement at this level. In contrast, the systems moving from good to great, characterized by more highly skilled educators, provide only loose guidelines on teaching and learning processes because peer-led creativity and innovation inside schools becomes the core driver for raising performance at this level.”

Leaders of school system change always face choices about how best to balance mandating change and persuading stakeholders to implement and support change. McKinsey found that, in the case of successful change leaders: “These choices appear to be based on four contextual attributes: 1) the desired pace of change; 2) whether the desired change is a “nonnegotiable” for the system reform; 3) the degree to which there are stark winners and losers as a result of the change; and 4) the credibility and stability of the system leadership and national government, and the historical and political context.”

Mandating change can speed the introduction of change (but not necessarily the total implementation phase of change – as the Australian government discovered to its cost with several initiatives launched during the Global Financial Crisis). Where changes are “non-negotiable” fundamentals for the envisaged school system, then mandates may be necessary to ensure that solid foundations for future system development are laid down. Where the change will result in stark winners and losers then finding consensus via persuasion may be very difficult. If the system leadership is seen as unstable or lacking in credibility then forcing lasting change through may not be possible.

Getting started

A key challenge in changing school systems is triggering a critical mass of change, i.e. getting the ball rolling in the face of the inertia around the status quo.

Across the 20 school systems studied by McKinsey, the impetus required to start school system reforms – what they called “ignition” – resulted from one of three things:

1. The outcome of a political or economic crisis,
2. the impact of a high-profile, critical report on the system’s performance; or
3. the energy and input of a new political or strategic leader.

They found that fifteen out of the 20 studied systems had two of these ignition events present prior to the launch of their reform efforts. Of the three, McKinsey state that, “the injection of new leadership appears to be by far the most important factor: all 20 of the systems studied here have relied upon the presence and energy of a new leader to jumpstart their reform program.” That leader could be at any level in the system that is capable of being relatively independently managed.

There will only be a real education revolution in this country when the lessons of what has been found to work in school systems around the world are learned by Australian policy makers and school system leaders; and when those lessons are reflected in the initiatives that our leaders put forward and in the way that they choose to get those initiatives accepted and implemented in their particular Australian context.

References

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