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**Great to Excellent: Considerations for
Professional Learning as the Next Stage of
Ontario's Reform Agenda is Launched**

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Introduction.

The Ontario school system is ranked amongst the highest around the globe. In examining the 20 most improving school systems in the world, McKinsey and Company (2010) identified Ontario as a top performer with a history of sustained improvement. Results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that Ontario students were among the world's best readers. Furthermore, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2010) identified Ontario as a high performing education system naming the province as a "world leader in its sustained strategy of professionally-driven reform of its education system" (p. 71).

In the report entitled '*Great to Excellent: Launching the Next Stage of Ontario's Education Agenda*', Fullan (2013) reviewed what has been accomplished in Ontario over the past nine years and identified focus, consistency of practice, and collective capacity as the strengths of Ontario's whole system reform approach. Noting that what started out as the government's agenda has since become a system's agenda with "the deep, widely shared ownership on part of the teachers, schools and school board leaders" (p. 2). Fullan cautioned about becoming complacent and pointed out that there remains much more to do in moving forward.

Fullan (2013) suggested two core aspects of the next phase of reform in Ontario. The first aspect was to maintain focus on the three core priorities while developing new, ambitious goals that will address gaps (e.g. ethnic sub-groups). The second aspect involved engaging in "focused innovation

relative to higher-order skills and qualities, test what works and spread effective practices” (p.7). Stressing the importance of cultivating leadership in all graduates, Fullan identified six key qualities (character, citizenship, communication, critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration and teamwork, and creativity and imagination) that contribute to the well-being of students and society. He suggested that these qualities can and must be “defined, operationalized in practice, measured to mark success and to clarify progress and next steps, and widely shared in terms of spreading what works” (p. 8).

Fullan’s look back and look ahead at Ontario’s reform agenda raises important questions for those responsible for professional learning to consider. These include the following:

- What factors have enabled the shift from isolated practice to collective practice and teacher ownership in Ontario?
- What still needs to be accomplished in regard to professional learning?
- What implications do Fullan’s suggested core aspects hold for system leaders in regard to their role in supporting professional learning?
- How will we get there?

Each of these ideas is expanded upon in the section that follows.

What factors have enabled the shift from isolated practice to collective practice and teacher ownership in Ontario?

The reasons we have seen a shift from isolated practice to collective practice and greater teacher ownership in school improvement efforts is because of two factors that go hand in hand: greater investments in employees and the transformation of professional development structures.

Over the past few years, models of professional development offered in Ontario school boards have improved significantly, reflecting the characteristics outlined in the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). Rather than devoting personnel, time, and other resources to system-wide professional development based on broad topics chosen by central office staff, school teams are engaging in professional learning designs that are more constructivist in nature. Collaborative inquiry is an example of such an approach that is being widely implemented across the province. Collaborative inquiry enables participants to generate knowledge and meaning as they move through the stages, co-constructing new understandings through *learning by doing* and reflecting on the incongruence between espoused theories and theories-in-use. Other examples include teacher moderation, lesson study, and the development of common formative assessments. These structures help to de-privatize practice and result in greater consistency of practice. In addition, the improved professional learning structures help bring to focus what adults need based on identified student learning needs.

Structures have been put into place to connect peers-to-peers and enable within school and across school networking. Educators are examining their practice collaboratively as a result. Onsite supports including instructional coaches have helped to ensure more consistent and deeper implementation of high-leverage practices in classrooms. Ontario's Leadership Strategy has helped to increase administrators' capacity to act as instructional leaders and support change in schools. In schools where teachers are provided meaningful voice in decision-making for school improvement, increased ownership is resulting. As professional development is becoming more relevant and contextual in schools in Ontario, educators are placing greater value on the time and opportunity to learn from and with each other.

What still needs to be accomplished in regard to professional learning?

McKinsey and Company (2010) suggested that collaborative practices are what makes system improvement self-sustaining noting that "Collaborative practice is about teachers and school leaders working together to develop effective instructional practices, studying what actually works in classrooms, and doing so with rigorous attention to detail and with a commitment to not only improving one's own practice but that of others as well" (p. 75). Levin (2008) also noted that the "collective ownership by educators of the practices that we know work for more students" (p. 106) is "the journey of pedagogical improvement we should be seeking for all schools" (p. 106).

It is necessary to continue to identify and utilize professional learning designs that promote collective practices. Peer-to-peer coaching, instructional rounds, collaborative inquiry, and protocols (e.g. tuning protocols) all promote a contextual, collective approach that will continue to move Ontario's education system toward de-privatized practices.

The utilization of powerful designs alone however, does not guarantee that deep learning will occur. What *still* needs to be accomplished in regard to professional learning is twofold. While greater collective practice is occurring, there is a need to build greater collective knowledge of adults in regard to supporting student achievement based on identified student learning needs. There is also a need to build greater capacity of school-based leaders (formal and informal) in facilitating meaningful adult learning.

The learning needs of teachers are surfacing due to a relentless focus on the identification of student learning needs as the basis for *the work*. While powerful designs that mobilize the capacity of peers are in place, some teams are only beginning to touch the surface when it comes to developing a common understanding the cognitive needs of their students and how to best support student learning. Teachers need additional guidance, time, and resources to help them develop a deeper and common understanding of how to support the identified learning needs of their students.

Fullan (2013) noted the need for “strong central leadership” (p. 11) in moving the work forward. Those who find themselves in the role of instructional leader are grappling with what it means to truly leverage

learning in professional learning and are looking for guidance in how to “intentionally interrupt” (Katz & Dack, 2013) and overcome the barriers that get in the way of adult learning. When engaging teams in learning designs and various protocols, administrators need to ensure that new understandings based on reliable research emerge and that these new understandings result in changes in classroom practice.

What implications do Fullan’s suggested core aspects hold for system leaders in regard to their role in supporting professional learning?

Fullan’s two core aspects are: a) sustaining improvement and b) engaging in focused innovation relative to higher-order skills and qualities, test what works and spread effective practices.

One implication for system leaders is to continue to bring awareness regarding disparity among various sub-groups (e.g. Crown Ward students, First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students, and students studying at the applied level) and to continue to allocate resources based on identified needs.

There are a number of implications regarding deeper and widespread innovation in focused areas. As Fullan (2013) noted, educators need to build on current knowledge and experience, develop a common understanding of higher-order skills and design learning experiences that develop these skills and dispositions. Shifting roles - teacher as learner, (teacher as coach, teacher as activator, and teacher as facilitator) and student as teacher – along with promoting meaningful student voice and

greater student autonomy will become increasingly important if we are to produce the *quality of leadership* in every graduate.

Fullan (2013) noted the need to share widely and spread what works. If we are to spread effective practices, networks at all levels must be established. Reeves (2008) noted that, “Teachers are influenced most by direct observation of the effective practices of other teachers. Therefore, the most effective central office administrators will become the architects of networks in which effective instructional practice is shared in as few degrees of separation as possible” (p. 81). System leaders, including staff developers, are also influenced by the direct observation of effective practices of others responsible for adult learning. Therefore, the most effective school board and provincial networks will provide opportunities for the sharing of effective *leadership practice* in as few degrees of separation as possible.

How will we get there?

Fostering a careful balance between autonomy and dependence.

By affording schools even greater autonomy in determining where, when, and how to allocate human and financial resources for professional learning, teacher leaders will continue to emerge. If given the time and space and provided the opportunity to identify and solve problems of practice together, innovation will occur and the work will be self-sustaining.

In terms of dependence, this is not in reference to fostering a heavy reliance on outsiders as experts, but rather fostering trusting relationships between central office staff and school based leaders. As Levin (2008) pointed out learning communities often require the assistance of an outsider who may be in a position to push teams to a deeper level of learning. In addition, an outsider can support school based leaders by assisting them in developing their leadership practice. How the outsider carries this work out is of the utmost importance. Outsiders can take on various roles (e.g. participant-as-observer, co-planner, expert, feedback coach, etc.). Roles need to be clearly defined and understood in order to ensure relationships maintain intact.

Central office personnel responsible for supporting those who lead learning in schools need to constantly examine and reflect on *their* practice. Superintendents, consultants, staff development coordinators, and coaches would benefit from identifying, examining, and reflecting on their own problems of practice. Opportunities should be provided through board level and provincial level networks for leaders of system learning to consider how to enact their practice skillfully, be observed and observe others in practice, obtain feedback, and share reflections. This will further assist in launching Ontario to the next level of performance.

Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) is the third iteration of standards outlining the characteristics of professional learning that lead to effective teaching practices, supportive leadership, and improved student results.

To learn more about the Standards for Professional Learning visit

<http://learningforward.org/standards>



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