



FINAL REPORT
OF THE
BUILDING BLOCKS FOR EDUCATION SUMMIT
September 13-14, 2010
Toronto, Ontario

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SUMMIT CO-CHAIRS**

Section 1 : The purpose and nature of the summit

Countries around the world have identified education and education reform as critical to the further development of nations and the global community. On September 13 and 14, 2010, more than 600 delegates from eight different countries gathered in Toronto for the Building Blocks for Education: Whole System Reform summit. Whole system reform is about successful reform involving all the schools in a given system, whether that be a province, state, or country.

Knowledge about what whole system reform is and how it works has become increasingly clear. Policy makers around the world have recently demonstrated keen interest in accessing and sharing this knowledge and identifying international benchmarks. The best systems are in continuous dialogue about whole system reform.

We are learning that system reform must be about *every* child. ‘Collective capacity’ – mobilizing groups at every level, developing their individual and combined skills, and enabling them to learn from each other – is central to progress. And nothing gets done without relentless, systematic implementation.

Ontario’s leaders have been deeply engaged in whole system reform since 2003. We have recognized that there is a great desire to learn from one another and to share what we know in order to find better and deeper ways to improve our systems. The latter, in a nutshell, was the core purpose of the summit.

Conference delegates represented every level and sector of the education system: student leaders, union representatives, principals, superintendents, state and government leaders, parent group leaders, business and community representatives. Approximately 20 per cent of the delegates came from out of Ontario.

The summit was hosted by Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty and co-chaired by Sir Michael Barber and Michael Fullan. The summit was organized around six major keynote presentations. Each keynote presentation, as well as Premier McGuinty’s speech, can be found at www.BB4E.ca.

Three keynote speakers came from jurisdictions that have been engaged in successful whole system reform for several years or more: Finland, Singapore and Ontario. Two other keynote speakers represented countries that are at the beginning stages of major, dramatic whole system reform initiatives: Australia recently launched an ambitious National Literacy and Numeracy Partnership, along with several concomitant reforms in curriculum and teaching and leadership development; and the United States, after years of relative decline, has embarked on a multi-billion dollar reform program called ‘Race to the Top.’ In addition, a delegation from Russia presented an interesting perspective on the complexities of whole system reform in that country. As we expected, learning was multi-level across the jurisdictions.

The sixth keynote address was a wrap-around presentation on what can be learned from the international benchmarking analysis by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This analysis not only described the results but, more importantly, addressed what's behind the numbers.

The six keynote addresses were interspersed throughout the two days. In addition, delegates attended workshops on overarching themes that helped frame many of the issues and focus the debate. Each workshop was offered four times, to allow all delegates to participate. The workshops were designed to stimulate participation and debate and were led by skilled facilitators.

1. Standards and targets

Facilitator: Ben Levin, professor at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, and former Deputy Minister of Ontario's Ministry of Education

This theme focused on why developing clear achievement standards is important, which standards are important and why setting targets is valuable. Does the focus on literacy and numeracy narrow the curriculum in dysfunctional ways? Are the 21st-century learning skills too vague or complex to attain?

In addition to talking about the content and applicability of standards, participants examined strategies for using standards and targets most effectively.

2. Assessment and use of data

Facilitator: Bill Hogarth, former director of education of York Region District School Board, Ontario

This theme examined the use of data and why data is needed to inform strategies in the classroom, in school districts, and at the ministerial level. What are some of the issues concerning the overload of data, timeliness of data, and data usability? How transparent is the data within the education sector and how transparent is it to the media and the public? What turnaround policies and strategies are key? Is there an inspectorate or a system of external review, and, if not, is it necessary? In addition to data on students, what other data is generated and used?

A panel of three experts – Carol Campbell (Stanford University), Andreas Schleicher (PISA/ OECD), and Mary Jean Gallagher (Ontario Ministry of Education) – led the workshop about assessment and use of data.

Carol Campbell spoke about characteristics of effective assessment systems, including having a clear vision of purpose and learning roles; assessing a range of content, skills and performance in authentic, applied and appropriate ways; fostering teacher learning and professional capacity, as well as student learning; and, supporting data-informed decision-making for local and system improvement.

Andreas Schleicher noted that a coherent system that assesses multiple layers – classroom, school and whole system – can help support learning, adapt and respond to new developments, add value for teaching and learning, and form a crucial part of a comprehensive and well-aligned instructional system.

Mary Jean Gallagher spoke about the work the student achievement division of the Ontario Ministry of Education is doing to refine a school effectiveness framework. One tool they use to do so is the Ontario's Statistical Neighbours database, which crosses student achievement data with school characteristic data so that like schools can find each other, and learn successful practices from each other.

3. Capacity building and the development of the teaching profession

Facilitator: Martha Dutrizac, director of education of Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board, Ontario

This theme focused on instructional skills: how they are developed and sustained and what competencies are essential for improving student engagement and achievement. How does the role of the teacher evolve as jurisdictions achieve whole system reform? Which are the best places to focus limited resources to develop teaching expertise?

4. Leadership development and sustainability

Facilitator: Tony Mackay, executive director for the Centre for Strategic Education in Melbourne, Australia

This theme examined the policies and practices with respect to leadership development at the school, district and government levels. Discussions focused on leadership development of principals and other administrative personnel as well as teachers.

How comprehensive is leadership development? How sustainable are personnel policies, succession planning and other aspects that foster individual development and selection? What more is needed in producing leadership for the future to sustain progress?

Summary of assessment and data session panel presentation

Overall, each keynote presenter offered strong contributions to the delegates and there were many opportunities for debate, both formally in the structured sessions and informally throughout the conference.

Section 2: Overview Grid of the Jurisdictions' Cases

The following matrix provides a bird's-eye view of each presenting jurisdiction's case, according to context, impetus or spur for change, goals and priorities, theory of action, what phase of change the jurisdiction is at, each of the four conference themes, outcomes and interesting points. Readers should delve into the cases (available at www.BB4E.ca) and draw their own conclusions.

TOPIC	JURISDICTION				
	Australia	Finland	Ontario	Singapore	United States
Context	<p>Approximately 3.5 million students (2.3 million of which are in government schools).</p> <p>States/territories have primary responsibility for education, but the federal government plays a major role in policy setting and program development.</p>	<p>Approximately 800,000 students.</p> <p>Finland has a culture of consensus and stability, a history of relative equity (narrow gaps, low influence of socio-economic background) and consistency of educational results.</p>	<p>Approximately two million students.</p> <p>In Canada, education from Kindergarten to Grade 12 is a provincial responsibility and there is no federal role.</p> <p>Ontario has a highly diverse population and, in general, modest to moderate gaps due to socio-economic differences.</p>	<p>Approximately 500,000 students.</p> <p>Singapore has a culture of respect for hard work, learning supports and education reform.</p>	<p>Approximately 50 million students.</p> <p>States and districts are responsible for day-to-day education. The federal government plays a role in legislation and providing additional funding.</p>
Impetus or spur for change	<p>In 2008, in response to wide differences between states and noticeable achievement gaps between indigenous students, the federal and state governments committed to national education frameworks and greater commonality.</p>	<p>The government is committed to updating their education system, building on high outcomes, adapting school programs to meet demands of the 21st century and placing greater emphasis on the "citizen skills" necessary in today's society.</p>	<p>In 2003, a new government came to office and made education a top priority, focusing on rebuilding professional and public confidence after unrest in the sector.</p>	<p>The government wanted to stay internationally competitive, go beyond their current knowledge to enhance 21st-century skills and place more emphasis on values and skills such as creativity.</p>	<p>A new administration elected in 2008 had the opportunity to respond to under-performing schools, lower international rankings and dissatisfaction with the previous administration's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law.</p>

TOPIC	JURISDICTION				
	Australia	Finland	Ontario	Singapore	United States
Goals and priorities	<p>National framework for schooling with new funding</p> <p>Deliver a national curriculum</p> <p>Increase transparency and accountability</p> <p>Close the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous students</p>	<p>Update and refine basic education principles and structure</p> <p>Clarify and enhance general goals</p> <p>Focus on individual support and guidance, for example, students with special needs, family school, etc.</p>	<p>Increase student achievement</p> <p>Narrow the achievement gap</p> <p>Increase public confidence in publicly funded education</p>	<p>Put the child at the centre of all we do</p> <p>Achieve high averages and peaks of excellence</p>	<p>Spur reform by supporting innovation in states and districts through additional competitive funding</p> <p>Improve technical support</p>
Theory of action	<p>Make legislative changes to reach agreements between Commonwealth and state governments, and shift focus from controlling inputs to assessing outcomes</p>	<p>Build on current success through public consultation and make legislative changes to the curriculum and structure.</p> <p>Develop explicit strategies to make changes outlined in implementation plan</p>	<p>Build relationships, knowledge and innovation</p> <p>Encourage transparency and accountability</p> <p>Learn along the way to get results</p> <p>Focus on eight components to guide implementation</p>	<p>Established “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” as clarion call to move together</p> <p>Diversify education landscape</p> <p>Offer more integrated professional learning for teachers to broaden learning culture in schools</p>	<p>Believe that federal legislation and funding can shape state and district priorities and action (and student outcomes)</p> <p>Develop plans informed by research evidence</p>
Phase of change	<p>They are early in their change phase.</p> <p>The government has created three new agencies as “infrastructure to support reform,” established a National Education Agreement and developed a national elementary curriculum.</p>	<p>As of 2010, they remain in the early phases. Preparation has begun, but implementation has not.</p> <p>The government proposed legislation on basic education and will have a new curriculum in 2011-12, to be implemented in schools in 2014.</p>	<p>They are seven years into implementation and have made infrastructure changes to provide support to districts, schools and educators.</p>	<p>They are building on a foundation from past efforts since 2003.</p> <p>There is a focus on 21st-century competencies (shown through initiatives such as “Innovation and Enterprise” and “Teach Less, Learn More”).</p>	<p>They are early in their change phase.</p> <p>The government introduced legislation in 2010 and has plans and funding in process. Some changes, such as charter schools, will begin implementation in some states and schools in 2010-11.</p>

TOPIC	JURISDICTION				
	Australia	Finland	Ontario	Singapore	United States
Theme: Standard and targets	Goals are to: Increase Year 12 or equivalent attainment to 90 per cent by 2015; halve the gap for indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy by 2018; halve the gap for indigenous students in Year 12 attainment by 2020.	General goals are based on the government's education and science policy aims. Overall, the aim is to ensure education quality and supply, and guarantee the education rights of <i>all</i> children.	The government has explicit descriptions of expected levels of student achievement for various grades, including a provincial target of 75 per cent of students reaching or exceeding the provincial standard and 85 per cent of students graduating from high school.	They have a national curriculum and statement of desired outcomes. They use national examinations and external review of schools as well as international benchmarking to measure. The main target is to have all students complete ten years of basic education.	They have developed high-quality state standards, with commonality across the country. This has proven to be a huge undertaking as states had different standards.
Theme: Assessment and use of data	Assessment is already well-established in schools, which evaluate themselves using frameworks provided by the government. Data for all schools is collected nationally and displayed on a national website.	Schools self-evaluate, using school-based assessments, and are also monitored regionally and nationally. Assessment is done as a sampling, rather than testing all students. All students write a matriculation exam at the end of school. The national curriculum is influenced by data from national and international monitoring of learning outcomes.	All students in grades 3, 6 and 9 take provincial assessments. To graduate high school, students are required to pass a literacy test. With district support, schools self-evaluate.	International benchmarking informs policies and practices, such as identifying common mistakes so teachers better understand and address. National examinations are critical, and there is a focus on assessment of and for learning.	High-stakes testing for staff, schools and districts under NCLB will be replaced by a new testing program that will go beyond the narrow focus and interventions of NCLB. The administration intends to build state and district data systems to promote achievement and to develop assessments based on new standards.

TOPIC	JURISDICTION				
	Australia	Finland	Ontario	Singapore	United States
Theme: Capacity building and development of the teaching profession	<p>They have new professional standards for teachers, distinguishing four levels of professional expertise.</p> <p>They have improved performance management in schools and teacher mobility.</p>	<p>Every teacher has a master's degree and high levels of autonomy.</p> <p>Teaching is seen as a desirable profession, building on a tradition of solid professional development and ongoing problem solving and innovation.</p>	<p>Teachers all have a BA or BSc and a B.Ed.</p> <p>The focus is on improving instruction through on-the-job professional learning communities and support from the ministry with largely voluntary take-up from districts and schools.</p> <p>The government has emphasized <i>collective capacity building</i>.</p>	<p>Teachers' compensation is based on performance. They are moving toward improving instruction through integrated professional learning communities.</p> <p>Professional development is now time-tabled.</p>	<p>They intend to develop a culture of continuous improvement with rigorous, fair teacher and leader evaluation, which will reward success.</p> <p>There is more support for teacher and leadership development.</p>
Theme: Leadership and sustainability	<p>The government has made substantial investments and established new agencies to ensure broad stakeholder input and approval for changes, which helps foster sustainability, as do national frameworks.</p> <p>A new initiative on leadership development and appraisal is being established.</p>	<p>A key concern is around attracting replacements for aging principals and focusing more on starting leaders to fill those gaps.</p> <p>There is continued professional development.</p> <p>Political stability and consensus ensures continuity.</p>	<p>A leadership strategy provides a big focus on improving instruction through on-the-job professional learning communities and development of leaders.</p>	<p>They have strategies to develop school leaders to support improved instruction.</p>	<p>There is an emphasis on building capacity to drive reform, although the details are not yet determined.</p> <p>They will recruit and train leaders to focus on performance management and instructional leadership.</p> <p>Sustainability is subject to administration change through elections.</p>

TOPIC	JURISDICTION				
	Australia	Finland	Ontario	Singapore	United States
Outcomes	An agenda is still emerging; outcomes are not yet available. Tests from 2010 will provide a sound baseline to measure progress.	Past educational outcomes have been good but there is no indication yet of outcomes of current whole system reform.	They have seen a steady rise in outcomes for Grade 6 reading, writing, and math, and graduation rates.	As seen through international comparisons, outcomes have been good: attrition has reduced from five per cent to one per cent, but there is no indication yet of outcomes of current reform.	Outcomes have been mixed and the United States has declined relative to other leading countries. Outcomes of current reforms are limited to confirmation of state plans and the dispersal of funds.

The case profiles provide illustrative examples of how different experiences play out in various jurisdictions. For instance, Finland has demonstrated a strong commitment to universal achievement and equity of outcomes in their education policy as well as overall societal infrastructure. The United States, on the other hand, has committed to turning around failing schools and, in another example, Australia is focused on addressing gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous students. Three jurisdictions—Finland, Ontario and Singapore—provide education in more than one official language. The United States provides education in English (except in Puerto Rico) but has many students whose first language is not English.

There are also many similarities across the jurisdictions' case profiles. In all instances, it is clear that policy makers are aware of the OECD findings about characteristics of successful systems. They are all committed to bringing greater breadth to the education program and putting more emphasis on "21st-century skills," "soft skills," "well-rounded education," or broad definitions of literacy and numeracy. In general, each jurisdiction demonstrates an aim to put more focus on individual students and on student engagement, in addition to student needs. This is perhaps less true for United States but this is difficult to perceive as the case focuses on the federal role.

In all cases, the key challenge is to make systemic changes in jurisdictions that, in the past, have not used appropriate incentives or accountability measures, have not been aligned with system goals, and have lacked coherency.

Section 3: Key issues

Several key issues emerged from the thematic discussions, listed here in point form. An analytic discussion in the last section provides conclusions about the summit as a whole.

Standards and targets

- Curriculum and standards will increasingly be globally benchmarked and relate to the creative future.
- Standards and targets need to encompass a broad curriculum for *all* students. We need to avoid false dichotomies within curricula, such as between literacy and 21st century skills.
- Although targets are optional, clarity about system direction is not. That direction must be widely shared.
- Systems need to demonstrate their impact to taxpayers.
- Assessment systems need to evolve and maintain clarity.

Assessment and use of data

- A broader evidence base is needed.
- Classroom and system use of data must be integrated.
- Collaborative professionalism should be linked to student data.
- Key concerns include the burden of work relative to yield, the danger of transparency and misuse of data, and using merit pay.

Capacity building and the teaching profession

- Coaching and mentoring systems focused on classroom improvement have great promise.
- Collaboration among teachers and across schools through networks should be encouraged.
- Schools, districts and faculties of education should be aligned.
- System-level leadership should stay the course and provide ongoing context for teacher development.
- The dilemma of flexibility versus fidelity must be continually addressed.

Leadership and sustainability

- A comprehensive set of leadership competencies is needed to drive 21st-century learning.
- Every individual leader has the responsibility to lead others and to learn the craft early.
- Collaboration and partnership will be required.
- Detailed and ongoing mentoring and coaching is essential.
- The system has to invest in, and cultivate, leadership early and on a continuous basis.

Section 4: Conclusions

In the final session, co-chairs Sir Michael Barber and Michael Fullan identified four “tensions” and three emerging challenges for whole system reform. The four tensions concerned:

1. Assessment and data

Some delegates argued that testing as practiced was too burdensome in time and too disruptive relative to its benefits. Other concerns were that too much of the data gathered never reached the classroom in usable ways, and that transparent data could be misused by the media and others to gratuitously rank schools, narrow teaching and reduce time on subjects not assessed, such as the arts.

Many of these issues were addressed during the summit, especially by the Schleicher, Campbell and Gallagher panel (see page 4). This panel claimed that data must be useful and usable, closely tied to improvement of teaching and learning, and able to convey to the public how the system is performing.

Co-Chair Comments:

Sir Michael Barber and I strongly agreed that transparency of results and practice was absolutely essential for whole system reform to be successful. We pointed out that evidence-based data formed a critical part of the policies and strategies of the successful jurisdictional cases; this was seen very clearly, for example, in the Ontario and Singapore cases.

We also stressed that clear, transparent, evidence-based accountability to the public was vital for the political legitimacy of system strategies. We also noted that as systems become successful, they evidence a thirst for assessment data, and demonstrate strong internal accountability. Systems begin to welcome transparency and treat it as a normal state of the way things are and should be.

2. Curriculum breadth

Another critical theme that ran through the summit was the matter of curriculum breadth. At one end of the criticism, a preoccupation with testing literacy was seen as inappropriately narrowing the curriculum. At the other end, the broad, whole-child curriculum was described as too vague and overloaded.

Co-Chair Comments:

Barber and I took the position that this was a healthy tension. In the best systems, literacy assessments include higher-order skills and literacy across the curriculum in science, social studies, health and physical fitness, the arts, and drama. As long as assessment and instruction is treated as a two-way street, and the debate focuses on identifying the core priorities essential for learning and teaching in a digital age, this tension is a healthy one.

3. Merit pay

Merit pay is a controversial topic brought to the fore in the summit largely because Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education in the United States, spoke about introducing performance pay as part of the “Race to the Top” agenda.

Co-Chair Comments:

Systems’ performance and the question of whether merit pay could enhance whole system reform must be an open and debatable matter. I observed that in most cases, the research does not support merit pay as effective. Moreover, in Ontario the introduction of merit pay would be a huge ‘distracter’ and that the current government would not entertain the idea of, let alone introduce, merit pay.

Barber agreed with my cautions but noted that high-performing advanced systems, such as Singapore, have introduced performance pay without a problem. He also pointed to the reforms in health care that he oversaw during the Blair government, which demonstrated that performance-related incentives did improve delivery and impact. Barber urged delegates to keep an open mind about performance pay.

4. Autonomy

Autonomy is probably the most complex of the four tensions. Neither centralization nor decentralization works. So where does autonomy fit? The short answer is that as systems advance in capacity, they can ‘afford’ greater autonomy at the local level. Put more strongly, autonomy, once capacity is at a high level, is necessary for further system improvement. The two most successful country cases—Finland and Singapore—illustrate this principle quite well. In addition, successful school systems exhibit not *individual autonomy*, but rather *collective autonomy in a highly transparent interactive mode*.

Co-Chair Comments:

We should not interpret the call for autonomy as a return to the autonomy of the individual teacher. ‘Behind the classroom door’ is decidedly not for fans of whole system reform.

In addition to these four ‘healthy tensions,’ three emerging challenges were identified that might guide further progress on whole system reform.

1. Simplicity

Simplicity is obviously a contrived term meant to connote two critical ideas. The simple part, so to speak, is that there are only seven key components necessary for successful whole system reform:

1. A small number of key priorities
2. A committed guiding coalition of central leaders
3. A strong focus on implementation-based capacity building in terms of instruction and collaboration

4. Transparency of data in the service of improvement and public accountability
5. A proactive stance relative to potential distracters and a corresponding stay-the-course commitment
6. Continuous attention to teacher and leadership development
7. A strategy for learning continuously from implementation successes and failures.

Co-Chair Comments:

The complex piece is how to get those few components to gel together. It is this chemistry that represents the sophistication of whole system reform. It is difficult because it involves ‘social complexity’—people with different agendas and competencies learning how to do new things together. The theme of leadership and sustainability is especially relevant here because the main job of leadership is to develop other leaders who together can orchestrate collective capacity and problem-solve as they go.

2. Deliberate practice

Another characteristic component of successful whole system reform is that strategies and practices that work are becoming increasingly ‘deliberate;’ they are becoming more and more clear, specific, and precise, as they have to be for whole system reform to be successful. This is also a key part of transparency and being able to access and understand exactly what is working. This access to precise, effective practices is greatly enhanced by technology as systems produce and share brief vignettes of filmed instructional practices that are personalized and geared to the learning needs of specific individuals and subgroups. Advancing the specificity, cultivation, and spread of deliberate, effective practices is essential for whole system reform.

Co-Chair Comments:

Deliberate practice has two faces. One concerns the specificity and implementation of practices that are known to be effective. Successful systems have a focused, relentless, consistent pursuit of deliberate practice that gets results. Equally important for successful systems is the commitment to innovate. Successful systems are simultaneously concerned with implementation of proven practices as they try to discover the next best practices. Consistency and innovation feed on each other in effective systems.

3. Centralization and decentralization

The tension between central direction and local autonomy is a perennial phenomenon in whole system reform. Neither works completely.

Co-Chair Comments:

The best systems have worked to refine the balance between direction from the centre and collective autonomy at local and regional levels. The end result is that the centre is influential through trusted direction and support, and the local level is prominent as it works through implementation in a highly transparent, interactive system.

Conclusion

The Building Blocks for Education summit came at a propitious time. The five jurisdictional cases and the PISA overview framed discussions of the key issues. Formal and informal discussions among delegates and presenters broadened understanding of the challenges and opportunities at hand, deepened knowledge of how to address and embrace those challenges and opportunities, and reaffirmed the commitment to education reform. Those contributions will help define and refine the whole system reform agenda in many jurisdictions.

The next stage of reform research and practice is to begin to spell out the different starting points and causal pathways that systems traverse toward success. The summit demonstrated there is a growing appetite for practice-based knowledge about the pathways for system reform given specific starting points. Over the next five years, it will be crucial to identify starting contexts and concrete pathways to success, including clustered interventions to get there.