How to Change 5000 Schools

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Introduction

This chapter describes the large-scale education improvement strategy implemented in the Province of Ontario, Canada, from 2004 until the present, as a case of capacity building in education. While many education reforms around the world have focused on issues of structure and governance, the Ontario strategy aimed to make a difference for students by changing school and classroom practices across the province while also generating public support and engaging teachers and other education staff in a positive way. Capacity-building does not happen in a vacuum, so the chapter places the case in the larger framework of vision, political leadership, and respectful dialogue that have also been central to Ontario’s ability to improve student outcomes substantially while maintaining public confidence and stability in the education sector.

The Ontario strategy has focused on changing the experience of students. As Levin and Fullan (in press) put it:

The central lesson of large scale educational change that is now evident is the following: Large-scale, sustained improvement in student outcomes requires a sustained effort to change school and classroom practices, not just structures such as governance and accountability. The heart of
improvement lies in changing teaching and learning practices in thousands and thousands of classrooms, and this requires focused and sustained effort by all parts of the education system and its partners.

As Elmore (2004), Fullan (2007) and others have pointed out, there is no way to change classroom practices across an entire system without significant investment and work to improve the skills of teachers and principals as well as the support they receive from the wider system. This is what is meant by capacity building, and it takes a sustained effort well beyond what occurs in most education reforms.

Ontario’s change process focused on a small number of key goals while still paying attention to a broad range of student outcomes. The overall approach has been respectful of professional knowledge and practice. Change strategies are comprehensive with an emphasis not only on professional capacity-building and strong leadership, but also on targeted resources and effective engagement of parents and the broader community. A substantial effort has been made to make main elements of change coherent and aligned at the provincial, district and school level. Key partners—the provincial Ministry of Education, school boards, schools, and provincial and local organizations of teachers, principals, and other partners—work together even though they do not agree on every aspect of the changes. Of course the process has had its struggles and imperfections, described later. Readers should be aware that the author was a principal actor in these events, as deputy minister (chief civil servant) responsible for education and therefore for these policies from late in 2004 until early in 2007.
Context: The Ontario education system

Ontario has about 2 million children in its publicly-funded education system, which is organized into four sets of locally-elected school boards with overlapping boundaries, reflecting Canada’s constitutional requirement for public support of minority language and Catholic schools. 31 English public school boards serve about 1.3 million students; 29 English Catholic boards serve about 560,000 students; 8 French Catholic boards have some 60,000 students and 4 French public boards have 13,000 students. School boards range in size from a few hundred students to about 250,000 students in the Toronto District School Board—one of the largest in North America. In total there are nearly 5000 schools extending across a huge geographic area—Ontario is 415,000 square miles, or about the size of the combined states of North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia and Louisiana, or somewhat larger than France, Germany, Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands put together.

The population is about 80% urban with most people living in the very south of the Province. The six largest school districts have about a third of all the students in the province. However many Ontario schools are small, with the average elementary school enrolling about 350 students and the average secondary school having fewer than 1000. Ontario also has a very diverse enrolment, with 27% of the population born outside of Canada (1/3 of whom have arrived in the last 10 years), and 20% visible minorities. The Greater Toronto Area, which has nearly 40% of the Province’s population, is one of the most diverse urban areas in the world and receives more than 125,000 new immigrants each year.
The provincial government provides 100% of the funding to school boards using a formula that is always controversial, but attempts to allocate money on a combination of per pupil or school amounts and elements that recognize differing needs across the province (Levin & Naylor, in press).

Ontario’s 120,000 teachers are organized in four unions that roughly correspond to the four school systems. Most of the 70,000 support staff—caretakers, secretaries, maintenance staff, education assistants and professional support workers such as social workers—are also unionized. School principals and superintendents must have specific Ontario qualifications. These, as well as teacher qualifications, are controlled under law by the Ontario College of Teachers, which is governed by its own Council elected primarily by teachers.

Education in Ontario has all the challenges one might anticipate—large urban areas and very remote rural areas; significant urban and rural poverty levels; high levels of population diversity and many English as a Second Language (ESL) students; areas with sharply dropping enrolment and others with rapid growth.

Prior to 2004, Ontario education had experienced a decade of problems (Gidney, 1999). Two successive governments introduced measures that deeply offended teachers, including reductions in staffing levels and increased workloads. These led to substantial labor disruption including many strikes and sustained ‘work to rule’ campaigns as well as
lower morale and higher teacher turnover. In 1997 the governance system was changed dramatically, including a reduction in the number of local school districts from about 140 to 70, removal of all taxation powers from local districts coupled with 100% provincial financing, and removal of school principals from the teacher unions. Funding was cut significantly in the mid 1990s, leading to the reduction or elimination of many programs and services, often with the worst consequences for the most vulnerable students, such as recent immigrants. An entirely new and supposedly more rigorous curriculum was introduced in every grade and subject. A provincial testing agency was created and provincial testing of all students began.

Many other changes were also introduced including compulsory pencil and paper tests for new teachers, compulsory professional development requirements for all teachers, and a more intensive program of teacher evaluation. Perhaps most importantly, the government was vigorously critical of schools and teachers in public, including at one point broadcasting television ads that portrayed teachers as overpaid and underworked. Years of this environment led to significant public dissatisfaction, increasing private school enrolment, and poor morale among teachers. In short, nobody was happy with the state of public education (Leithwood, Fullan & Watson, 2003; Hargreaves, 2003).

In October, 2003 the Liberal opposition won the provincial election with the renewal of public education as one of its highest priorities and an ambitious set of policy commitments around improving education. Their platform was developed through intensive discussion with many stakeholder groups and through analysis of efforts in
other jurisdictions. Michael Fullan also played an important role in advising the Liberals as they developed their plans.

A Premier and ministers (Ontario follows the British parliamentary system in which ministers responsible for a portfolio are appointed by the Premier from among those elected to the Legislature) with a deep commitment to public education brought strong political leadership. The importance of strong and effective political leadership is underestimated in the literature on education reform.

The strategy

The new Ontario government understood clearly that public education can only thrive if citizens have confidence in the public school system so that are willing to send their children and provide their tax support. The crafting of the platform reflected the political reality that to generate public attention, policy goals have to be few in number and relatively simple in expression (Levin, 2005).

One major commitment was to reduce class sizes in primary grades to a maximum of 20 students. Two other key promises were made around student achievement - to improve elementary school literacy and numeracy outcomes and to reduce high school dropout rates. These priorities reflected public concern about student performance in the province (Livingstone & Hart, 2005). Elementary literacy and numeracy skills as measured by curriculum-linked provincial tests had been roughly static over the previous several years (EQAO, 2006), while high school graduation rates had actually decreased following
major changes to the high school program and curriculum in the late 1990s (King et al., 2005).

The three core priorities were complemented by a range of other commitments. Some of these, such as strengthening school leadership or changing curricula or involving parents, were necessary to achieve the two key goals. Other initiatives, such as long-term collective agreements with staff and improvements to school buildings including unprecedented provincial involvement in 2005 in the negotiation of four year collective agreements with all Ontario’s teachers, were essential so that all parties could focus on improving student outcomes instead of being consumed by other labor issues. Still other initiatives, such as strategies to support safe and healthy schools, were necessary to sustain public support for improved outcomes by letting people know that the basic needs of students were also being attended to. Even where there is a strong focus on a small number of key goals, ancillary and potentially distracting issues still require attention. Indeed, the literature on school change gives insufficient attention to the challenge of focusing on teaching and learning while still managing a complex and diverse set of other issues in a volatile and highly political environment (Levin, 2005; Levin & Fullan, in press).

**Elementary school literacy and numeracy**

Ontario’s Literacy and Numeracy Strategy is aimed at improving literacy and numeracy skills for elementary school students. The government set a goal, as part of their election platform, of having at least 75% of grade 6 students able to read, write, and do
mathematics at the expected level for grade 6 by the spring of 2008—a four year time frame.

The Strategy assumes that improving student learning requires significant and sustainable change in teaching and learning practices in all of Ontario’s 4000 elementary schools (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007). To achieve this, a multi-element strategy was put in place. Main elements of the strategy include:

• creating the position of Chief Student Achievement Officer, filled by an outstanding Ontario educator, to bring constant attention to student achievement issues

• creating a dedicated Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to implement active and extensive capacity building around literacy and numeracy through a variety of means described below;

• adding some 5000 new teaching positions over 4 years to reduce class sizes from junior kindergarten (age 4) to grade 3 to a maximum of 20 students in at least 90% of classrooms while also providing support to teachers to adopt instructional practices to take advantage of these smaller classes;

• adding about 2000 specialist teachers to enrich teaching in areas such as art, music and physical education while also providing more preparation and professional learning time for classroom teachers;

• implementing a voluntary ‘turnaround’ program that provides additional support and expert advice for schools facing the most significant challenges in improving achievement;

• supporting ancillary practices such as an expansion of tutoring (often by students in faculties of education) and a fuller engagement of parents and communities.
As a further measure, the provincial tests in grades 3 and 6 language and mathematics, which are closely linked to the Ontario curriculum, were changed in 2005 to take less time and give quicker results to schools. Although many teachers continue to have concerns about provincial testing, this is now a rather minor issue in Ontario education because of the increased support for improved teaching and learning including for using a range of student achievement data to support school improvement.

The test results are the main indicator of the success of the government’s plan, but they have not been treated as the only significant measure of progress. Ontario has adopted a broader strategy for public accountability, in which the Province and school districts report publicly on a variety of indicators of student progress. For example, the Ministry issues an annual report that provides information about all 72 school districts on 8 key indicators (http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/bpr/). All of this is intended to foster and support public confidence in the quality of public education.

**Increasing high school graduation rates**

As of 2003-04 only about 60% of Ontario students were graduating from high school in the normal four years, and only about 70% were graduating even after taking an extra year (King et al., 2005). These are clearly unacceptable levels in a knowledge society and are well below those of other Canadian provinces and many other comparable countries (OECD, 2005, p.39). Within a year of being elected the government set a target of having at least 85% of entering grade 9 students graduate from high school in a timely
way by 2010. Although originally framed as a commitment to reduce dropout rates, Ontario’s strategy was reframed to have a positive emphasis on improving high school graduation rates.

Many of the elements of this strategy are the same as those in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and are discussed below under the heading of ‘capacity building’. However the high school strategy also had elements that take account of the specific challenges facing high school education, which has historically been harder to change than have elementary schools (World Bank, 2005).

Specific components of the high school graduation strategy beyond those just noted (Zegarac, 2007) include:

• building stronger transition models between elementary and secondary schools and paying attention to good transitions into high school for grade 9 students;
• developing a focus on and resources for literacy and numeracy in all areas of the high school curriculum;
• revising curricula in some key areas such as mathematics and career education.
• expanding program options through more co-operative education, credits for appropriate external learning, and dual credit programs with colleges and universities;
• creating a ‘high skills major’ that allows school boards to work with employers and community groups to create packages of courses leading to real employment and further learning;
• passing legislation to require students to be in a learning situation (school, college, apprenticeship, work with training, and so forth) until high school graduation or age 18.
Another noteworthy feature of the high school success strategy is the creation of a Student Success Commission, which brought together teacher unions, principals and superintendents to support effective implementation of the strategy in schools so as to prevent disputes at the local level.

**Capacity building as a central focus**

The most important element of each strategy involved measures to build the capacity of schools and educators to support improved student outcomes. The strategies assumed that outcomes would only improve if people in the schools were helped and supported in changing their practices to create and sustain student success. In both strategies the focus was on raising the bar and closing the gap - on improving overall levels of achievement and on reducing gaps in achievement for key target groups who were underperforming.

In each case the Ministry of Education created structures to lead the capacity building. A new Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat was created headed by the Chief Student Achievement officer (a new position for Ontario) and staffed by outstanding educators seconded from around the province to lead and guide the overall initiative. For high schools, the Ministry had begun funding, in 2003, a Student Success Leader in each school district. An expanded Secondary Schools Branch of the Ministry provided leadership and coordination at a provincial level.

The capacity-building strategy in Ontario was extensive. It focused on six interrelated elements:

- supporting effective planning for improvement in every school and board;
- supporting effective leadership for improvement in every school and board;
- developing specific approaches to reduce achievement gaps for target groups including boys in elementary schools, recent immigrants, visible minorities, Aboriginals, and students in special education;
- extensive, carefully designed professional development for educators, focused on key areas related to improvement;
- providing high quality, relevant materials to teachers and schools;
- supporting use of data and research to inform school, district and provincial policy and practice.

While the descriptions below may give the sense of a long list of separate initiatives, in fact all aspects of capacity-building were connected through district leadership teams, though the provincial management structures, and through ongoing communication that kept front and centre the overall goal around improving student learning.

These efforts were led and coordinated by the Ministry, but at all times had high levels of input and participation from all parts of the education system. The programs were designed to recognize and build on existing good practice in Ontario schools. Schools and districts were also invited to find their own ways to move forward on the agenda; while every school and district had to pay attention to issues of improvement, the Ministry did not impose mandatory strategies as to how this should be done. The provincial plan assumed that lasting results could only be obtained by building the commitment of local educators, and this cannot happen through mandating professional practices.
Planning for improvement. Every school district and school in Ontario was asked to develop a plan for improvement. However the point of this work was not to produce a document, but to create a real framework for the ongoing work of improvement. So planning was not mandated through a template or form, but was led collaboratively by school district and Ministry staff. Plans could look different in each school, as long as they addressed real ways of improving teaching and learning and student outcomes. The staff of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and the Student Success Leaders worked closely with boards, reviewed many plans, and gave feedback around how these could be sharper and better grounded in evidence. People also came together across districts to share their ideas and learn from each other.

Closing gaps. The Ontario strategies were based on improvement occurring in every school, but they also recognized that some groups required additional particular attention. Special strategies were put into place to improve supports for Aboriginal students, English language learners, French language students, and students in special education by recognizing their particular needs and situations, including specific training, materials, policies and stakeholder engagement.

Leadership for improvement. There can be no sustained improvement without effective leadership. The capacity-building work around leadership included extended training and learning opportunities for school principals (done in conjunction with the three provincial associations of principals), building of leadership networks within and across districts, the development of a provincial infrastructure for shared and coordinated leadership
development, inclusion of principals in much of the training for teachers around literacy and numeracy, and, as noted below, efforts to address some of the workload pressures on principals in Ontario to allow them to focus on instructional leadership.

Professional development. The Ontario strategies recognized that one-shot workshop approaches to professional development would be insufficient. Instead, a whole range of approaches to learning and development have been implemented in various boards and schools across the province. These include use of literacy and numeracy coaches or lead teachers, a whole range of different forms of ‘learning communities’ focused on literacy and numeracy, staff meetings keyed to provincial webcasts, inter-school visits to study alternative practices, and many others. At all times the intent has been to embed professional learning in the ongoing work of teachers and schools. Professional development emphasized key areas such as differentiated instruction, use of data, and use of shared and guided reading. As well, the Ministry provided funds to the provincial teacher organizations to allow them to increase their professional development work.

Materials. The Ministry commissioned and produced a variety of documents and materials to support effective teaching and learning in priority areas, as well as making some revisions to key curriculum documents. Expert panels on literacy and numeracy produced detailed guidance for teachers, principals and school boards around research implications for effective practice. All schools received copies of or online access to a whole range of materials for teachers, including teaching guides, videos, webcasts for download and others, all of which were tied to professional development priority areas.
Use of data and research. The Ontario plan emphasized policies and practices that are supported by research evidence while encouraging schools and districts to use their own data and action research as well as the broader research literature to inform their work. A provincial education research strategy was developed, universities were contracted to write short ‘what works’ papers for schools, external evaluations of the main provincial strategies were commissioned, and schools and districts were supported in improving their use of data to guide their own improvement plans. Data use has actually had its own capacity-building strategy within the larger effort.

**Sustaining elements**

Capacity building can only be successful in a stable education system, which means on that is respectful of all participants, comprehensive, coherent, and aligned.

**Respect for staff and for professional knowledge**

The Ontario change strategy has consistently recognized and supported professional knowledge and skill. In addition to those elements already mentioned:

- The public statements of the government and ministry are supportive of public education and the work of educators and support staff.
- The government abolished some policy elements (such as paper and pencil testing of new teachers) which were seen by teachers as punitive, and replaced them with policies (such as induction for new teachers and changes to teacher performance appraisal) that are seen as supportive of professionalism. Staffing levels have
increased despite declining enrolment, while teacher workload has been reduced and preparation time increased.

• As noted already, the strategies build on successful practices in Ontario schools and involve extensive sharing of good practice. Almost everything that is happening at the provincial level draws on good practices that were already underway in schools somewhere in the province. Every effort is made to acknowledge publicly the good work of schools and districts.

**Comprehensiveness**

The Ontario strategy, while centred on these key student outcomes, is not limited to those. The focus on literacy and numeracy in elementary schools is complemented by strong support for other curricular areas such as physical activity and the arts, both of which have been expanded in the last three years. The strategy explicitly rejects narrow views of teaching and curriculum.

The Ontario theory of improvement recognizes schools as ecologies (Fullan, 2006, 2007), so gives attention to building capacity among teachers, to improving leadership, to involving parents, to changing policies, and to adding resources—all at the same time. It is also important to pay attention to the issues that could turn into huge distractions—such as having collective agreements in place with teachers and support staff, dealing with safety issues such as bullying, and ensuring that school buildings are in good repair. There has been action in each of these areas. The effort to be comprehensive, however, creates the challenge of overload, discussed a little later.
Coherence and alignment through partnership

The nature of politics is that government directions can change quickly. Sustainable improvement in schools therefore requires real commitment and participation by all the partners—teachers, administrators, boards, and the broader community. Changing the negative and combative public discourse around education in order to build public confidence was itself an important policy goal of the government. However the efforts to build and sustain strong partnerships all take place within the common emphasis on improving student outcomes.

The Ontario approach built on Fullan’s (2006) ‘trilevel solution’, in which governments, school districts and schools work together on common approaches and strategies. An explicit part of the strategy involves building strong relationships and close connections with boards, schools and other organizations. Careful and explicit attention was given to building strong positive connections with every part of the education system.

The Ministry of Education implemented new mechanisms for consultation with partners on virtually all programs and policies. A Partnership Table brings the Minister of Education together with all the major stakeholders on a regular basis. The Minister and senior ministry staff meet regularly with the main provincial organizations, including teachers, principals, and superintendents. There is extensive consultation and ongoing communication with school boards.
The government took particular steps to involve teachers and their organizations in the development of policies and programs. In 2005 then-Minister Gerard Kennedy played a vital role personally in ensuring that unprecedented four year collective agreements were put in place for all teachers across the province, giving teachers, students and the public a multi-year assurance of stability after ten years of conflictual labor relations. Steps have also been taken to work more closely with support staff groups and to recognize their need for involvement and for professional development.

Principals are widely recognized as playing key roles in school improvement. In 2005, the Ministry issued a paper on ‘role of the principal’ that outlined a number of steps to support principals in focusing on leading improvement in student outcomes. Professional development for principals has been expanded, and efforts are being made to improve some of their key working conditions, though the job of principal remains a challenging one.

**Targeted additional resources**

The government has recognized that significant education renewal does require resources. From 2003 to 2007 funding for public education increased by 24%, or 28% on a per pupil basis. These funds have been allocated carefully to support the student achievement agenda. The largest single portion has gone to salary increases so that schools can attract and retain good staff. Another very significant amount has been used to expand staffing in key areas, such as smaller classes, student success teachers, specialist teachers in elementary schools, more support staff in key areas, repairs to aging
buildings, anti-bullying programs, and the various other elements of the strategies. Additional funding has also gone to small and isolated schools to expand the services they can offer. The point has never been simply to provide more funds, but always to support better outcomes for students.

**Political leadership**

It is important to mention again the vital role of strong political leadership across the education system. Change in Ontario has been driven by the Premier and three successive ministers of education, each of whom has helped advance the same agenda. Many of the elements of this agenda are not particularly politically attractive but have still been supported. Schools and districts have been able to focus on the same priorities for 4 years. Sustainable change has also been supported by many other political actors, including elected school boards and the leadership of provincial organizations including trustees, parents, teachers, students and administrators. This consensus has not been forced by the provincial government, but has been carefully built through the kinds of measures just discussed. This political work of building consensus and trust must be an essential element in any program of education reform (Hubbard, Stein & Mehan, 2006).

The success of these efforts can be seen in the much more positive public positions being taken by stakeholder groups in Ontario, including school boards and teacher unions. Differences and issues remain, and can be heated, but the overall tone of discussion has changed dramatically for the better, which also helps sustain public support for education.
In an atmosphere of increasing trust it is more common for all parties to attempt to work out differences through discussion and compromise rather than through public battles.

**Results so far**

The two main strategies are relatively new. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat only began operation early in 2005, and the most important elements of the Student Success Strategy only came into place later in 2005, although both built on work already underway in a number of school boards and have been able in less than 2 school years to have a substantial impact on teaching practices and on students’ results.

Results on Ontario’s grade 3 and 6 provincial assessment have improved substantially and broadly over the last 3 years. Overall about 10% more students, or 15,000 per grade, are now achieving the provincial standard (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007; full results are available at www.eqao.com). The number of schools with very low performance has fallen by three-fourths (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007). The system as a whole is half way towards the target of 75%, though that target itself is not an end-point. Nor are these results just a matter of test-taking. Gains on tests only matter if they represent real improvements in students’ skills, and teachers across the province confirm that we are seeing real skill improvements for students, not just increases in test results.¹

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¹ This claim is based on the author’s visits to more than 100 schools across Ontario as well as conversations with leaders in all districts and all major stakeholder organizations. All Ontario education leaders will acknowledge the very significant improvement in teacher morale since 2003.
The indicators for high school improvement are also positive. Graduation rates have begun to rise—from 68% to 73% in 2005-06 (Zegarac, 2007). Results on the provincial grade 10 literacy test — itself not a particular focus of the changes—improved substantially in 2005 and 2006 (full results at www.eqao.com). Credit accumulation in grades 9 and 10, which so strongly predicts graduation, is also improving, so there should be further significant improvements in graduation rates in the next few years.

Just as importantly, there is a level of energy and enthusiasm in Ontario schools that has not been seen for quite some time. Fewer young teachers are leaving the profession and fewer teachers are choosing early retirement—tangible indicators of improved teacher morale.² Thousands of teachers are participating voluntarily in professional development programs. More teachers are giving positive responses to surveys of their level of satisfaction with their work (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006).

**Challenges**

No change of this magnitude occurs without challenges. Four are particularly important to note. First, two or three years of improvement are only a start. Much remains to be done. For example, although achievement levels are increasing, some groups, such as students in special education or recent immigrants or Aboriginal students, remain far behind (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007). In other areas such as improving the

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² The Ministry of Education spent an additional $30 million on salaries for teachers in each of 2005-06 and 2006-07 because the number of teachers actually retiring fell significantly below the projections based on teacher age profiles and previous years’ retirement patterns. That is, many fewer teachers retired in each year than had been anticipated.
physical condition of buildings and improving services to high need students there has been progress but nobody would claim that these challenges have yet been fully met.

Despite improved morale, Ontario educators are feeling that they are being asked to address many initiatives all at the same time (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006). Even though most people are positive about the elements of change, putting them all together has brought stress—though of a more positive variety than was experienced a few years ago during all the labor disruption. Many teachers, and especially principals, feel overloaded, yet sustainability depends on people seeing the long-term task as feasible as well as challenging. Although this situation is slowly improving, at all levels of the system there is still a need for more alignment and coherence, and fewer distracting issues.

A third challenge has to do with resources. As noted, the government has increased funding for public education significantly, but schools and boards still face financial pressures in matching resources to demands. All partners will need to continue to work hard to ensure that resources are used as productively as possible. In addition to new resources, this means re-examining current allocations of staff and funds to assess whether these actually are the most effective ways to use resources in support of students. The allocation of resources is an important area for more research and more effective application of existing research knowledge. For example, practices such as retaining students in grade or keeping students for a fifth year of high school effectively reduce the
resources available for more effective strategies such as early intervention for success (Levin & Naylor, in press).

Finally, the Ontario approach poses challenges around the balance between support for and criticism of change. Even the strongest supporters of the Ontario strategy would admit that not everything is perfect; there have been bumps on the road and there remain areas of tension and insufficient progress. Governments do tend to try to focus on success and play down problems. Criticism based on evidence plays an important role in helping to identify areas for further improvement. That is why the Ministry of Education has funded credible third parties to undertake public evaluations of its major strategies, with initial results very positive (Audet et al., 2007; Ungerleider, 2007).

In his postwar novel, Billiards at Half Past Nine, Heinrich Boll (1959) makes the point that it is much quicker and easier to destroy something than it is to build it. This is certainly true of large-scale change in education, which is always fragile. If government policy were to change significantly, or if other issues were to occur that refocused attention on areas of conflict, the gains could be threatened. There are always groups, including political opposition groups and elements within each of the stakeholder organizations, that are looking for increased conflict; that is simply a reality of politics. In that sense, sustainable improvement, like many other human goods, requires constant and relentless attention and reinforcement. It can never be taken for granted but has to be recreated continually.
Conclusion

The strategy in Ontario is intended to create an atmosphere of ‘positive pressure’ (Fullan, 2007) that creates the conditions for people at all levels to invest the energy and commitment necessary for the hard and rewarding work of continuous reform. Positive pressure provides resources, increases expectations, furnishes data on an ongoing basis connected to further reform, avoids unfair comparisons among schools and interprets results based on multi-year trends. Success is celebrated, blame avoided, and lack of improvement is addressed in a transparent and supportive manner.

As this handbook testifies, there is a body of knowledge that can support effective and satisfying improvement in public education. The Ontario case is an example of large-scale change in education that is respectful of educators, fair to students and communities, and based on the best available knowledge. It is not perfect, and remains vulnerable, but it does show that when the right elements are brought together, both better results for students and higher satisfaction for educators can ensue.
References


