**Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform**

* Michael Fullan, 2011

an excerpt, for the whole article see: <http://www.michaelfullan.ca>

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

*1. foster intrinsic motivation of teachers and students;*

*2. engage educators and students in continuous improvement of instruction and learning;*

*3. inspire collective or team work; and*

*4. affect all teachers and students – 100 per cent?*

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

*1. accountability: using test results, and teacher appraisal, to reward or punish teachers and*

*schools vs capacity building;*

*2. individual teacher and leadership quality: promoting individual vs group solutions;*

*3. technology: investing in and assuming that the wonders of the digital world will carry the*

*day vs instruction;*

*4. fragmented strategies vs integrated or systemic strategies.*

Although the four ‘wrong’ components have a place in the reform constellation, they can never be successful drivers. It is, in other words, a mistake to lead with them. Countries that do lead with them (efforts such as are currently underway in the US and Australia, for example) will fail to achieve whole system reform. Even worse, chances are that such strategies will cause backward movement relative to other countries that are using the right drivers.

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

If you want the instructional practices-student engagement/achievement nexus to be the centre of attention do two things: name it as the focus, and use the group to get more of it. The holy grail of teacher quality is only a proxy for effective instruction. Once you dwell on instruction the whole system can be mobilised to that end. It won’t be heavy handed accountability, teacher appraisal, rewards and incentives, and the like that will move big systems. Movement on this scale can only be realised through actual improvements in instructional practice. The latter, as I have said, is tightly connected to the intrinsic motivation of teachers and their peers to do the job well. Policies that focus on both human and social capital and do this with transparency of practice and results will create all the pressure and support that is needed for effective accountability.

The good news is that the right drivers in combination – capacity building and group development – generate greater success and greater accountability. Dylan Wiliam (2011) captures this phenomenon in his book *Embedded Formative Assessment* . He shows how five key strategies of formative assessment

strengthen both instruction and achievement. These strategies:

1. clarify learning intentions and criteria for success
2. structure/engineer effective learning experiences
3. provide actionable feedback to learners (feedback that “feeds forward”)
4. establish active learners as instructional resources for each other; and
5. develop learners as the owners of their own learning.

This is really our instruction-achievement nexus. Simultaneously it builds capacity and addresses accountability. Student assessment data are positioned primarily as a strategy for instructional improvement and serve secondarily as external public accountability. The causal sequence is the right one – get more instructional improvement and you get more accountability. Everybody wins. For this to

happen it requires new capacities across the entire profession.

In short, individual rewards and incentives and other investments in human capital do not motivate the masses. If you want to reach the goal faster you must invest in capacity building, and use the group to get there. There is heaps of evidence staring policy makers in the face that it is the collaborative group that accelerates performance, including squeezing out poor performers as teaching becomes less private and

more collaborative. These results occur because the day-to-day pressure and support is built into

the work. It is social capital leveraging human capital that has the quality and speed essential

for whole system reform.

***Teacher Engagement in Education Reform***. If policy makers don’t ‘get’ this one, I can guarantee you they will choose the wrong drivers every time in each of our pairs. If we let the wrong drivers have their way they will undercut intrinsic motivation, and group development. If accountability-driven standards and assessment do not kill you, individualistic appraisal will come along to make sure you are dead. The right drivers, by contrast, energise the group and the individuals therein.

Key leaders can make a huge difference at this critical juncture. Jettison blatant merit pay, reduce excessive testing, don’t depend on teacher appraisal as a driver, and don’t treat world-class standards as a panacea. Instead, make the instruction-assessment nexus the core driver, and back this up with a system that mobilises the masses to make the moral imperative a reality. Change the very culture of the teaching profession. Do so forcefully and you will find many allies. It is time to embrace, and relentlessly commit to the right drivers.

\*Fullan’s remarks eloquently summarize the key anecdotal experiences I’ve personally experienced assisting various schools and districts burrow deeply into improving academic literacy instruction across grades and content areas the past 6-7 years. These focused projects prioritize teacher leadership, public practice (e.g. learning walks, video, peer to peer), coupled with intentional culture building by the many skilled leaders I’ve had the good fortune to work alongside. I am absolutely convinced these notions are an essential aspect of our quest to improve schools for ALL students. KF (2015)