

Educational Improvement in Victoria

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For the past three years, I have had the opportunity to visit Victoria, to work with teachers and administrators in Victorian schools, to visit classrooms, and to engage in an extended conversation with leadership of the educational improvement strategy at the state, regional, and local levels. This experience has been part of a larger program of research and practice I have been pursuing, primarily within the U.S., around the state of knowledge about large-scale improvement efforts in public education. I think I have a grasp of the major trends in the development of the Victorian strategy, as well as some understanding of what that strategy looks from the school and classroom levels. In this note, I would like to reflect on what I have seen, and to put these reflections in the context of my broader understanding of the state of knowledge about large-scale improvement in an international context.

The Strategic Imperative in School Improvement

The feature that distinguishes the present stage of educational reform internationally from all previous stages, and also distinguishes the Victorian approach among its peers, is the presence of a *strategic* view of school improvement. The problems of school quality and performance are *systemic* in nature—that is, they stem from a constellation of social, organizational, cultural, and technical factors within schools that reinforce each other to hold the system in a powerful state of equilibrium well below its potential. Complex systems produce exactly what they are designed to produce; in this sense, they are highly functional at maintaining themselves, regardless of whether they are functional in terms of achieving larger social purpose. Systemic problems are *not* amenable to piecemeal solutions. Past reform efforts have focused on intervening in what reformers regarded as the key weaknesses of the system—the structures of schools, the allocation of authority between the center and periphery, the level of resources in schools, etc.—and these piecemeal efforts have failed to produce systemic effects. The strategic view is premised on the assumption that systemic problems required multi-dimensional, integrated, highly-focused, and coherent interventions, defined by a clear theory of action, in order break the equilibrium of an underperforming system.

Improvement strategies have to be complex and simple at the same time—*complex* in the sense that they have to operate across a number of social, organizational, cultural and technical dimensions simultaneously, *simple* in the sense that they have to embody a clear storyline, or narrative, that everyone in the system can understand and use to give purpose to their work. Systemic strategies work to the degree that they change not only the visible features of the system, but also the values, beliefs, and expectations of the people who work in the system and their daily practice.

The Victorian strategic model is distinctive in several respects. First, its central focus is the creation of *human capital*. The central message is simple: Schools improve by investing thoughtfully and coherently in the knowledge and skill of educators. Everything else is instrumental to this purpose. The big idea at the center of the strategy is that systems transform themselves, and grow out of old patterns of practice and performance, through collective, concerted, and sustained learning on the part of *everyone* in system. At the classroom level, this means creating expectations that teachers will have access to sustained professional development over the entire course of their careers, and that their individual choices about personal growth and development must be orchestrated with a broader set of organizational and systemic objectives for improvements in student learning. The theory also says that students who live their lives in the presence of adults who are engaged in continuous learning will themselves become self-managing learners. At the school level, leadership is defined as (1) creating conditions for continuous learning in schools; (2) developing the capacity of teachers and support staff to assume leadership roles and to develop their leadership potential as their careers progress; and (3) managing one's own learning and development as a leader in concert with others in similar roles. At the system level, the human capital strategy inverts the usual bureaucratic pyramid and puts state and regional officials in the role of managing the resources necessary to create conditions for learning at the school and classroom levels, rather than attempting to improve the performance of schools by telling them what to do.

In my experience, the level of agreement among policy-level actors and practitioners around the theory of action embodied in this human capital strategy is atypical. From the ministerial level, through the departmental level, to the operating level of the public schools office, into the regions and then into the schools, there is broad agreement on the essential message that the strategy is fundamentally about investing in the knowledge and skill of people. In other settings, it is not unusual for people at the local and school levels to have a relatively clear and shared understanding of the human investment imperative, but it is very rare for people at the upper levels of policy to have any grasp of the specifics of the human investment model. In most settings outside Victoria, there are very costly gaps in understanding between policymakers and practitioners around the central imperative of human investment.

Another way in which the Victorian strategy is distinctive is that accountability measures are seen as instrumental to the development of human capital. In many other systems, including all state accountability systems in the U.S., and the U.S. national policy (No Child Left Behind), accountability for performance is considered to be the leading instrument of policy, and human investment is considered to be a collateral responsibility of states and localities, which can be exercised according to their preference. In the U.S., this situation has resulted in a disastrous gap between capacity and performance—the states and the federal government exert increasing pressure on schools to perform, but they have essentially defaulted on their responsibility for human investment, leading to an increasingly large number of low-performing schools that continue to operate at low capacity. What is impressive about the Victorian system is its emphasis on using school performance data, and data on teacher, student, and parent attitudes toward their schools, as the basis for human investment decisions, rather than primarily as the basis for administering rewards and sanctions. Throughout the system, in my experience, people talk about the data as a means for focusing attention on improvement, rather than as mark of *status* and a trigger for *sanctions*.

A final way in which the Victorian strategy is distinctive is in defining leaders as the essential carriers of the new culture of school improvement. It is one thing to say that school leadership is critical to school improvement, to invest in the development of new leadership talent, and to provide learning opportunities for incumbent leaders to develop and expand their knowledge and skill. Most large-scale improvement strategies do this in one way or another,

some better than others. This aspect of leadership development is central to the Victorian strategy. But this is not what distinguishes the Victorian strategy from others. The distinction is that in Victoria, the leadership strategy is essentially the leading instrument in the cultural transformation of the enterprise. This approach is embodied in several concrete actions. The state sponsors a specific model of leadership, and orchestrates its leadership development activities around that model, focusing on Sergiovanni's five dimensions of leadership: technical, human, cultural, educational, and symbolic, and creating a common language for analyzing and discussing the leadership function in school improvement. More importantly, the state engages in powerful organizational and symbolic activities that bring school leaders together around this common language and framework—the much-imitated Big Day Out, regional networks, professional development activities, etc. And finally, through the principals' individual development plans, the language and expectations of the leadership model and its use as an instrument of school improvement are made explicit in accountability relationships.

The Victoria strategy continues to move forward, with the introduction of an explicit theory of action about school improvement and an explicit framework for purposeful teaching. These next steps are intended to provide increasingly explicit guidance to teachers and principals for what the work of the new system will look like. These initiatives also mark the movement of the Victorian strategy from the early to the middle stage of implementation. The early stage consisted of developing the idea of a comprehensive strategy of school improvement, reframing the role of the department around that strategy, reorienting the state and regional offices around a new mission, and beginning the long, laborious job of connecting the broader framework of improvement to the daily work of people in schools. The middle phase, which is beginning about now, is about pushing the work more deeply into the practice of teachers and principals, modeling a consistent and coherent culture around instructional practice, leadership, and human investment, and beginning the task of accumulating knowledge around the practices at the school and classroom level that lead to the results the strategy is intended to produce. The initial, predictable skepticism expressed by many that this was just another reform initiative, which would eventually die away and be succeeded by yet another, has begun to erode. Participation in state and regional events is increasingly active and the powerful incentives for collaboration among colleagues are beginning to displace the previous culture of individualism and atomization. The coherence and consistency of the message from the top—the credibility of the current leadership's commitment to supporting high quality practice, the consistency of the message from the political level—are beginning to change the expectations of practitioners about their relationship to the state. The transition from the early phase to the middle phase is where the details of the strategy and its implementation get worked out.

The Predictable Problems of Large-Scale Improvement

As noted above, complex systems are built to do what they have always done, not to engage in fundamental transformations. When they are stretched, in the way that the Victorian educational system is now being stretched, they activate all sorts of complex mechanisms, conscious and unconscious, to return to the equilibrium of the old culture. Transformations in complex public systems like education do not occur in a discontinuous way, no matter what the private sector management literature suggests about corporate transformations. Large public school systems don't go to sleep one evening and wake up the next morning to a new world of transformed beliefs, practices, and performances. Large-scale improvement occurs by a steady slog. The devil is always in the details. Progress is never a simple upward linear progression; it is typically a process of fits and starts, small breakthroughs and mistakes, powerfully motivating successes and discouraging setbacks.

There are some predictable problems with the middle stages of improvement strategies that it is worth noting in the context of the Victorian experience. The first might be called “initiative overload.” The default culture of educational systems is attuned to view every new initiative as a separate project or program, rather than a piece of a steadily-developing, coherent strategy of improvement. From a strategic perspective, each new framework—from the Blueprint to the Performance and Development Culture to the Theory of Action to the Framework for Purposeful Teaching, with many incremental steps between—is an increasingly specific elaboration and source of guidance for an overall, coherent course of action. From the field, the view might be understandably different. In a culture that is trained to view initiatives from the top as unwarranted interruptions of the “real” work, it takes time for people to adjust to the idea that there might be a coherent storyline or narrative behind the various frameworks and there is an underlying consistency in their messages. The key element in this transformation is consistent modeling, engagement, and listening between the leadership of the system on those who carry the strategy at the school and classroom level.

The second predictable problem is that many school-level practitioners are deeply conditioned by their experience to be suspicious of ideas that come from outside their local context and that seem to be disconnected from their local experience. It is in the nature of strategic school improvement that much of what comes to local practitioners will be outside their context and experience, since it is the powerful pressures toward localism and isolation that have created the necessity for a strategic approach in the first place. In the Victorian context this situation is aggravated by the large numbers of schools engaged in the strategy, the relative geographical isolation of many schools, and the sense of threat engendered by competition from the independent and religious sectors. There is already evidence that the culture of localism and suspicion is eroding, largely due to the explicit efforts of the Department to create a common culture of leadership across the system and to model activities at the regional and state level what it looks like when practitioners with common concerns get together around shared problems. In the middle phase of the strategy, however, practitioners will become increasingly demanding, asking for existence proofs of practices that will work in their settings, asking questions about the fit between the broad learning objectives for teachers and students embedded in the strategy and “their” particular teachers and “their” particular students. To a large degree, the strategy will succeed to the degree that state and regional actors are seen to be responsive to these demands to make the global strategy evident and visible in local settings. There are many positive signs that this is already happening. The networks are beginning to form increasingly ambitious ideas about what collaboration means. There are case studies and practical guides in the system that address specific issues raised by practitioners. School leaders and teachers show up for professional development sessions primed with questions about the relevance of the strategy for their practice. Sustaining and building on these early developments will be critical.

The third predictable problem is perhaps the most troubling. I have noticed, working with improvement strategies across a number of contexts, that there is a relatively consistent pattern in the early responses of schools to initial efforts at system-wide improvement. Large-scale improvement strategies almost always *increase* variability among schools in quality and performance, before they *decrease* variability. This effect is not surprising if you think about the underlying processes of improvement at the classroom and school level in system-wide improvement strategies. There is typically a lot of unused capacity for improvement in schools that are relatively well-equipped to start improvement work. That is, some part of the population of schools is ready to respond to external support and guidance, and they respond relatively quickly, given the opportunity. There are also schools, however, that are simply not built to respond, or at least to respond in powerful and productive ways, to external support and

guidance. These schools actually have to engage in a process of building their internal capacity to respond before they can be expected to respond in any powerful way. In the middle, between these two types of schools, is a variety of schools at different levels of capacity with different orientations toward the improvement strategy. So, when you apply a system-wide strategy to a diverse population of schools, guess what? The initial distribution of growth in quality and performance actually spreads out, rather than closing down. This phenomenon is especially troubling in Victoria, since the international evidence suggests that, while Australia looks good relative to other industrialized countries in terms of overall performance, it is among the lowest performing countries in terms of equity in the distribution of performance among students. A critical feature of the middle stage of the Victoria strategy will have to be how to handle variable capacity at the school level. Some schools will need a great deal more attention than others. The schools that need the most attention won't always be the ones that are most interesting and attractive to work with. And they will often be schools where the default culture is strongest and the immunity to improvement is most deeply rooted. As the strategy develops it will be important to have explicit strategies of differential treatment for schools.

Because the Victorian strategy is fundamentally a human capital strategy, it has a built-in bias to correct for these predictable problems. In the U.S., for example, states and localities are just now coming to realize that their relatively punitive, regulatory approach to accountability is producing many more low-performing schools than they can hope to improve, given their under-investment in human capital. For these systems, the adjustment to the realities of mid-course problems is going to involve some harsh and uncongenial trade-offs. The advantage of the Victorian model is that it is relatively well-designed to deal with these predictable problems, because the solutions are all extensions of the work already underway.

The Next Level of Work

The good news is that Victoria, because of the thoughtful design of its improvement strategy, is on the leading edge of policy and practice in the world. There are few improvement strategies that are close to as well developed, and probably none that have focused with such depth and complexity on the basic human capital problems associated with school improvement at scale. Unfortunately, this is also the bad news. What it means is that there are relatively few places Victoria can look to find answers to the kinds of problems that will surface through the middle and late stages of the strategy. It is the special affliction of precursors to have to make the mistakes that others will learn from.

A major variable in determining the prospects for sustained improvement in Victoria will be maintaining stability and focus in the policy environment around the strategy. I have written extensively and critically about the mismatch between the incentives under which elected and appointed officials work and the requirements of sustained school improvement. In many cases, the policy environment is too turbulent, and policymakers are too short-sighted and impulsive, to create an environment conducive to sustained improvement. Victoria is a special case; one of too few such cases. But I am skeptical that it can be maintained over a long enough period of time to bring the strategy to its fullest realization. I think the best way to deal with the problem is to name it and make it a topic of political discourse, on the theory that political decision makers cannot be held accountable for things no one regards as important. I think it should become a point of pride among elected officials that they have been able to hold a consensus around the requirements of large-scale improvement in the face of many competing pressures and commitments, and they deserve political credit for doing so, even if it means some sacrifice in not being identified with the next big idea.

I have written in other places that different stages of improvement at the school and system levels require very different practices of leadership, and that it is not useful to think of

these different practices as identified with different people. The challenge of leadership—at the state, regional, and school levels—is going to be how to broaden the repertoire of leaders as the strategy progresses to practice what the situation requires. Specifically, the early stages of improvement at all levels require a high proportion of leadership competence and focus on the technical side. People in schools will simply not be persuaded that proposals to improve their practice are credible if the people running the organizations in which they work cannot make the trains run on time. Increasingly, as the work progresses, the emphasis of leadership shifts from a primary focus on the technical to a broader focus on the organizational—that is, building an organization that allows the work to happen, and, more importantly, allows the work to begin to reshape and transform the culture. This stage necessarily involves leaders learning how to give away authority and to create strong lateral accountability relations within the organization to substitute for more vertical relations. And finally, as organizations become good at running their improvement processes, the role of leaders is increasingly to be custodians of the culture and to provide guidance for other peoples' work consistent with the culture. Most principals in Victoria are somewhere in the early stages of development of the technical and organizational domains, and relatively few have a fluency in the cultural domain. This is not a commentary on the quality of leadership, just an observation about the relationship between the practice that I observe and the longer-term requirements of the work. Principals will need a lot of guidance and support in learning how to stretch out their practice to meet the increasingly complex demands of the work. This problem is made more complex by the situation noted above in which different schools will be operating a very different levels of capacity in the initial stages of improvement.

The next generation of leaders of Victoria schools are currently in the first five years of their teaching careers. One of the things I have observed about large-scale improvement processes, when they are working, is that they accelerate the retirement of relatively senior principals, who often feel that the work that is required of them is not the work they signed up for, and they also accelerate the path into the principalship for relatively junior practitioners. Five years ago, it would have been unheard of for a student exiting from Harvard's one-year, full-time principal certification program to move directly into a principalship. Most have less than seven years teaching experience, and they typically planned to spend another five years or so in senior teaching roles or junior administrative roles before being offered a principalship. In the last two years, it has become increasingly common for students to be offered principalships straight out of the program, and to be competitive for some of the most desirable jobs on the market. We can argue about whether this is a good or a bad thing. I come from a generation where—in the mid-1960s—it was relatively commonplace for people in their late-20s and early 30s to assume major leadership roles in public institutions. These same people now blanch at the idea that people who are like they were when they were starting their careers could actually do what they did earlier in life. My sense is that in order to meet the demands of leadership in improving schools we will have to radically revise our current notions of what qualifies a person for a leadership position, and, concurrently, what kinds of early career supports new leaders will need to be successful.

If the Victoria strategy works, as I expect it to, the teachers who are currently in their first five years will be the primary carriers of the new culture into the future. They will be the generation of educators who will, essentially, have never known what it was like to work in the old culture, whose entire professional experience will have been shaped by the expectations that are currently embedded in the new culture. This is how large systems transform themselves. This is how Japan transformed its education system in the wake of World War II. This is how the Nordic countries moved from pre-industrial, largely agrarian societies prior to World War II to high value added post-industrial social democracies in the present. They made explicit

decisions to grow their economies by growing their education systems. They made explicit decisions to transform their education systems by deliberately creating a new generation of educators, with few if any ties to the old culture, who would be the leading edge of a new view of what education was about. They invested heavily in the development of this culture, and they put substantial professional authority and expertise behind the role of educators in the new culture.

Teachers who are currently in their first five years of practice, and all those who follow them, should be identified as the generation that will lead the cultural transformation of the system. They should be given opportunities to develop a cosmopolitan view of their practice; one in which new and powerful ideas about teaching practice are public goods, rather than private property. They should be given opportunities to lead in ways that expand their understanding of the organizations in which they work—in school site teams, in curriculum development initiatives, in networks with other teachers outside their schools. They should be explicitly groomed for leadership roles in schools and they should be exposed to skills in coaching and mentoring others early in their careers. The system should accommodate to different expectations for leadership practice by providing early entry into the principalship and modifying the initial job expectations by taking non-instructional duties off the table initially and providing focused coaching and mentoring on instructional leadership issues. Most importantly, leadership development programs should be designed around the actual career aspirations and interests of the potential participants, not just the formal requirements of the job. Susan Moore Johnson's data on new teachers in the U.S., for example, suggests that their views and preferences around work are substantially different from those of prior generations: they expect explicit guidance and mentoring, they expect to play a role in their own evaluations, they expect to have regular contact with their peers as part of their work, they expect to be given increased responsibility and compensation commensurate with their knowledge and skill, and they expect workplace conditions consistent with the requirements of the work. They also manifest a willingness to move out of education if their expectations for a professional work environment are not met. Building a new culture requires basing organizational decisions on the *future* workforce, not accommodating apologetically to the constraints of the old culture.

The Victorian improvement strategy has taken the most powerful ideas in good currency around school improvement and has put them into a coherent form that is distinctive and that defines the leading edge of improvement strategies internationally. Its primary focus is transforming the system by transforming its human capital. Everything else is instrumental. It is not about making schools more accountable for its own sake. It is about using accountability as mechanism to support and improve practice. It is not about telling people in the field what to do. It is about setting overall expectations for performance and quality and putting the resources and supports behind those expectations.