Achieving sustainable school transformation

Turning round a school is one thing – making the change permanent another. **David Crossley,** author of *Learn to Transform,* looks at ways to achieve school improvement that lasts

There is a deep moral purpose to what we do in education, so we should always be seeking the next stage of school improvement, but what is the best way to achieve it? While there is a wide range of writing, thinking and expertise about 'school turnaround', there is relatively little written about sustaining improvement and transformation.

Learn to Transform, the book I co-wrote with Graham Corbyn, seeks to present a philosophy, style and approach to school improvement and transformation which responds to schools' current needs and aspirations. It seeks to show how schools in all settings can be transformed. It builds from what each school does well and takes schools from where they are to where they might be. It also seeks to

engage schools with and integrate short-, medium- and longer-term strategies from the outset and offers a whole spectrum of approaches to sustainable school improvement including turnaround, moving from satisfactory to good, from good to great and beyond great to outstanding. Working with and learning from over 1,000 secondary schools in England and educators in Australia, the USA, Middle East and Far East, having access to their learning and thinking, was a great privilege.

and colleagues with dignity, shifting culture, and the examples we draw on demonstrate not just how to transform a school but, more importantly, how to ensure that any transformation is sustained over time. From whatever point a school or schools begin their journey, in our view transformation is realisable, attainable and sustainable.

If the book has an underlying aim it is to provide a framework for school leaders, teachers and communities to engage with, and to offer examples to encourage and support them as

and is still demonstrating real expertise at lifting attainment of the least well-performing schools. But if England is genuinely to be able to match the best-performing systems, we need to see performance through the prism of students and who and where they are rather than through just the school as an entity. It is a statistical fact that most of the children who are underachieving are not in the worst-performing schools. Research by the OECD shows that within-school variation is greater than between-school variation. Quite simply, there should be a greater focus on using the better parts of schools. A focus on both students and on parts of schools will provide key levers for change and improvement.

Public service ethic

It is also clear that we need to begin to move beyond top-down approaches if we are to really raise the ceiling. The style, philosophy and approach of so many recent initiatives in many countries has been top-down, and as the challenges get greater there is a tendency for them to become more prescriptive and 'one size fits all'. In England, while we must celebrate what high-level accountability and engagement with data have achieved, we must also recognise that it is not accountability and top-down measures alone that have achieved the most significant changes to date. The catalysts for really impressive changes in our system have come through the imagination, determination, creativity and adaptability of many who are committed to a public service ethic, who believed they could make a difference and did. This is the belief that the approach and Four Stage Model developed in *Learn to Transform* is built from.

In many ways this approach is supported by the recent publication by McKinsey, *How the world's most improved systems keep getting better*, which looked at 20 of the best-

Above, and previous page: Wildern School, Hampshire, whose work on 'learner voice' and use of new technologies feature in Learn to Transform with more than 20 other innovative examples of practice in schools

From this it was possible to draw a number of conclusions about what makes the most difference and how to sustain improvement. We learned a great deal about what makes an immediate difference and how to seed medium- and longer-term change too. Schools can do anything but not everything, so creating capacity is a key element, and here we explored the notions of abandonment and redeployment of existing resources – which is perhaps even more important in the current climate.

Above all else we saw the impact of successful schools being the key drivers of school improvement. We believe the style and approach embodied in the model, the focus on treating schools

they create their own 'transformation journey'. It is this sort of approach that will best allow our system to take its next steps too.

The recent PISA results showed that England is not moving forward as quickly as other OECD countries. This point was stressed in the government's education white paper published in November 2010: "What really matters is how we're doing compared with our international competitors. That is what will define our economic growth and our country's future. At the moment we are standing still while others race past."

If this is the case, what is the best way forward? The system in England proved very good at 'raising the floor'

Innovative integration of school design, curriculum design and use of new technology at Cramlington Learning Village, Northumberland

in 2006 in the foreword to the ASCL publication *Achieving More Together*: "Collaboration between schools is the best way to improve schools and to enable all students to achieve their potential."

The aspiration is to argue for a 21st-century approach to school transformation that is led by schools, informed by the best national and international knowledge base from within and outside education, and to provide a model and framework that really do motivate and inspire. The breakthrough in the thinking was to directly correlate what schools do with how they do it and the culture of the people involved.

It was also interesting to focus on the combination of leadership and management. Management processes are crucial. From the work we did with successful schools, whether they are innovative or traditional, two key common features emerged: robust management processes and standard operating procedures. They really do what they say and say what they do!

performing systems. The report divides the systems into poor to fair, fair to good, good to great and great to excellent and argues that all improving systems appear to adopt a similar set of interventions appropriate to their stage in the journey. For England, which is at the 'good to great' and 'great to excellent' stages, they argue the focus is on the quality of teaching and leadership, and then peer-based learning through school-based and system-wide interaction, as well

as supporting system-sponsored innovation and experimentation.

This is what I have called 'school-led system leadership' and it has become an increasingly significant contributor to school improvement in England over the last decade. It is clearly illustrated by the growth and impact of the work done by numerous school leaders and their staff in supporting other schools. As John Dunford, former general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), remarked

We also noted that the concepts of abandonment and redeployment of existing resources, as referred to earlier, are underused levers for change. What tends to happen when something new is initiated is that it is added to what is done already. This means something else is done less well and the cycle is repeated when the next new initiative is added. However, the heart of any success involves people, interpersonal skills, trust, aptitude, and other positive dominant cultures. If these dynamics are not evident, transformation is unlikely to occur. Real improvement comes from building capacity and harnessing motivation that schools and teachers already have.

Testing the model

The next challenge was to find ways to test the model more widely. Here a discussion with the former director of children's services for a large urban area, who is now at a leading private sector service provider, offered the opportunity. It quickly became clear that we shared many beliefs about the need for a new approach to school improvement which could be based on school-to-school support but would also professionalise it and take it to a new level. From this came a new public-private partnership involving schools, other experts and the Tribal group.

It is this notion of professionalising collaboration between schools that resonates so well with the Inspirational Schools Partnership. It is an example of what two key personal mentors, Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley of Boston College, describe in their recent book as a "fourth way" approach and is a practical realisation of what they argue for. This includes: an inclusive vision with school, communities and corporate partnerships working together; learning that is creative, engaging and demanding; prudent accountability; and shared ambitious improvement targets.

The other key ingredient was linking technology and people by creating two world-class software environments. One of these was Navigator – a unique online space developed from a model developed and described in *Learn to Transform*, which links content, process and culture where individuals or groups of schools develop their knowledge and explore where they aspire to be. The aim is to use this to create an inspirational knowledge base of examples generated from all schools that engage locally, nationally and internationally.

Underpinning all this is a real commitment to school-led development, improvement and change. Through modelling what they have done, schools take the risk out of innovation for others. When staff in schools resist and say that something cannot be done, school leaders have more confidence to assert that it can be done; they know someone who has done it already. Better still, of course, schools are happy to help each other!

Arising from this, the overall message is to encourage schools to focus on learning and to respond to new challenges and policies by asking the questions: will it enable students to maximise their potential and how do we know? Policies and aspirations like those outlined in the recent government white paper and those that preceded it can operate at the government and organisational level far beyond the needs of those they are meant to serve. They can leave the profession feeling disempowered and 'done to', or they can be seen as giving us with opportunity to seize the agenda in a way that inspires us to raise the bar and focus on why we came into the job in the first place.

At the heart of all this is the notion of empowering and motivating schools and communities to make a difference for themselves. For this to occur and be sustained, fostering a positive culture is the key. You can have the best equipment, policies and buildings but if you have not got the right people, or the people right, change will not usually happen and it definitely won't be sustained. The key task and role of leadership (including government) is creating the right culture. When you have created it anything is possible; without it even the best vision and aspiration are worth little.

A positive culture is the most important thing of all. The model and approach in *Learn to Transform* seeks to confirm the link between what Jim Collins (2004) called 'Built to Last' transformation and sustainability. In his words, "One of the greatest misconceptions about Built to Last is it is about making things permanently fixed in time and space, unchanging, static. Nothing could be further from the truth; to be built to last you must be built to change."

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