The top and bottom of leadership and change

Successful large-scale reform efforts — one in Northern England, another in Canada — bolster the approach of "leading from the middle."

By Andy Hargreaves and Mel Ainscow

For 15 years and more, in the U.S., England, parts of Canada, and elsewhere, reforms to improve educational equity and achievement have come in large-scale measures — designed and delivered in detail by big government across whole systems. Such top-down reforms promised a sharp focus on improving literacy and mathematics achievement and boosting high school graduation.

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What can the U.S. learn from ENGLAND and CANADA?

▶ Top-down reforms have a long history of failure. A middle-driven approach of coordinated change, collective responsibility, and delegating resources and authority to school districts can yield positive results.

Training, coaching, and other professional development supports accompanied some top-down strategies. Others, like the No Child Left Behind law, proved excessively demanding, requiring progress for all categories of students every year and imposing punitive consequences when schools and districts fell short.

But punitive or supportive, all top-down reforms have an Achilles heel: Their focus on micromanaging two or three measurable priorities only works for systems pursuing traditional and comparatively narrow achievement goals. A digital age of complex skills, cultural diversity, and high-speed change calls for more challenging educational goals and more sophisticated and flexible change strategies.

Thus, reformers are advocating greater autonomy for schools and teachers, increased freedom for local curriculum design, and more independent and personalized access to technology. But the history of bottom-up innovation and individual school autonomy is not impressive. In the 1960s and '70s, innovative ideas often didn't spread beyond a few isolated classrooms and schools, and, when they did, their implementation often was fatally flawed (Gross, Giacquinta, & Bernstein, 1971). There is no reason to believe that efforts to spread the success of a few innovative, high-tech schools will fare any better today.

ANDY HARGREAVES (andrew.hargreaves@bc.edu) is the Brennan Chair in Education in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Mass. He is co-author of *Uplifting Leadership* (Wiley, 2014). **MEL AINSCOW** is a professor of education at the University of Manchester, United Kingdom, and author of *Toward self-improving school systems: Lessons from a city challenge* (Routledge, 2015).

In an age of innovation and diversity, top-down strategies are inappropriate, while bottom-up strategies seem unable to achieve improvement on any significant scale. So what should we do instead? One possibility is shifting attention toward districts, which can support schools and teachers in innovating and improving together.

Leading *in* the middle

In North America and Northern Europe, school districts have historically been the linchpin of local democracy (Katz, 1987; Bryk et al., 1998). California Gov. Jerry Brown has recognized this by returning education spending control back to the state's over 900 local districts, placing maximum control at the most local level of competent authority (Torlakson, 2015). Districts can provide a valuable focus for school improvement, be a means for efficient and effective use of research evidence and data analysis across schools, support schools in responding coherently to multiple external reform demands, and be champions for families and students, making sure everybody gets a fair deal. Strong districts are powerful forces for positive educational change (Leithwood, 2013). Strong and steadily improving districts like Boston Public Schools and Long Beach Public Schools have received widespread acclaim for systemwide gains (Barber, Chijioke, & Mourshed, 2011). In England, some of the most dramatic turnarounds have been in urban districts, like the London boroughs of Hackney and Tower Hamlets, which went from the lowest performers in the country to scoring above the national average on all key indicators (Hargreaves, Boyle, & Harris, 2014; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

So some reformers argue that the middle level needs a stronger role in order to implement changes from the top and to move around ideas and strategies percolating up (Schleicher, 2015). This amounts to a kind of leadership in the middle — a healthy sort of middle-stage spread.

Weaknesses of the middle

Leading in the middle is promising, but it's not enough. Not all local school systems or districts are strong. Some districts do well; others fare badly. Districts vary in their resources and capacities for change, like networking and seeking other ideas. Districts can be self-serving, politically toxic, glacially slow at driving improvement, and, as in the Atlanta cheating scandal, just plain corrupt.

In the U.S. and England especially, there are unacceptable variations in school district quality. Differences in demographics, poverty, funding, and capacity to attract and develop effective leadership means very high-performing and very low-performing districts sometimes coexist side-by-side (Noguera, 2014; Sutton Trust, 2015). This has created a conundrum of district-driven improvement:

Large-scale success cannot be achieved if districts continue to act independently of one another.

> ***Although all high-performing nations are characterized by strong local control, not all nations with strong local control are high performing.***

One response to this conundrum is to say that school districts aren't worth saving and either deliver reforms in detail from the top or institute market-based, individual alternatives like charter schools, free schools, and academies that are insulated from district control. Another response is to use central funding formulas to compensate for bad variation and inequities. However, the strings attached to this funding often heap more grant writing and accountability requirements on already overstretched high-poverty districts.

Leading *from* the middle

A third way to reduce bad variation among school districts is to promote collaboration among them so they share resources, ideas, and expertise and exercise collective responsibility for student success. In this *leading from the middle* approach, districts don't just mediate and manage other people's reforms individually; they become the collective drivers of change and improvement together. When districts lead from the middle together, they:

- Respond to local needs and diversities;
- Take collective responsibility for all students' and each other's success;
- Exercise initiative rather than implementing other people's initiatives;
- Integrate their own efforts with broad system priorities; and
- Establish transparency of participation and results.

These components of leading from the middle are

evident in two systemwide reforms in which we have been closely involved — the Greater Manchester Challenge (GMC) in England, and district-driven improvements in Ontario, Canada.

Greater Manchester Challenge

The United Kingdom government initiated the GMC in the 2007-08 school year by bringing together 10 school districts (known in the UK as local authorities) to improve standards over three years. Co-author and professor of education Mel Ainscow was appointed chief adviser to this approximately $80 million (U.S.) project. "There are lots of good things going on in schools in Greater Manchester," Ainscow said upon his appointment. "The task now is to spread the best practice to all schools."

But how would this be done? Ainscow's group devised several principles for the effort:

- Leaders of successful schools would work with weaker schools to improve their leadership teams;
- Schools with similar student populations would be clustered to share best practices; and
- Local problems would be met with local solutions.

Getting schools to collaborate was not a new idea in England. What was different, though, was that while previous school-to-school networks and partnerships had tended to bypass local authorities, 10 of them would be driving improvement together (see Ainscow, 2015 for a full account of the GMC).

Multiple strategies brought this simple principle to life. Schools cooperated across authority boundaries. Recently turned-around schools became key in helping other schools. Hub schools that demonstrated excellence in particular areas provided extensive training and development for teachers in other schools and local authorities. Schools at different stages of development organized in "families." A Jewish school assisted a predominantly Muslim partner. A Catholic school prayed for a good inspection result for its secular counterpart. School officials found hidden capacity and capitalized on it; they shared knowledge and overcame old rivalries for the higher purpose of improving the whole area.

The Manchester area had suffered from historic problems of unemployment and deprivation for four decades, but by 2011, GMC schools were above the national average on all standardized test measures. Secondary schools in the most disadvantaged communities improved at three times the rate of the national average.

By working together, principals (known in England as head teachers) changed the cultures of the schools. Instead of blaming parents in poor families for not being interested in their children's learning, schools came to appreciate the stresses facing families and then responded with local flexibility and intensive support. They began to focus on delivering better, more interesting teaching and learning through strategies like cooperative learning and Japanese lesson study. There was a lot of pressure on teachers and schools to work hard to improve results, but there also was more emphasis on caring for the adults in the schools as well as the children so that the schools became happy and professionally fulfilling places to work.

None of this was easy. Local authorities are political entities as well as providers of services. Internal conflicts and external turf wars were often exacerbated by national policies that promote interschool competition. A steering committee involving national government and local representatives got locked into conflicts over the budget. A committee of leaders of the 10 authorities became fractious whenever it was presented with disturbing data or with concerns about lack of progress. While six of the authorities were willing to change roles and responsibilities, two others accommodated the new language of shared responsibility for improvement without making any real changes in practice. But over time, with persistence of effort, relationships improved, some personnel changed, ideas and strategies started to be shared between schools as well as within them, and the authorities even began to commit to some joint delivery of services.

The strategies adopted in Manchester (and now in Wales) define the essence of leading from the middle. But this term didn't arise in the UK. It first emerged in a systemwide project with 10 school districts that the other co-author of this article (Andy Hargreaves) carried out with his colleague Henry Braun in Ontario, Canada.

Ontario district-led reforms

Ontario has undertaken one of the world's best-known, large-scale educational reforms. The most

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publicized parts of the reform, involving more than 5,000 schools, have been the focus on raising expectations and narrowing the achievement gap in tested literacy and mathematics and on increasing the rates of high school completion. The design and implementation of this reform — by a "guiding coalition" of political and professional forces — was complemented by strong support to enable districts to be successful in achieving the desired results (Campbell et al., 2015).

The province's 72 school districts and their system leaders led a less well-known part of the reform agenda. In 2005, the government gave the districts an initial investment of $25 million (Canadian) to design and implement a strategy to improve learning and achievement for students with special educational needs that would also benefit all students. One system leader described this change as "leading from the middle." After four years of this reform, the literacy achievement gap between students with special needs and other students had narrowed in reading and especially in writing.

A survey of the reform indicated the changes brought greater collaboration among staff, more joint planning, and broader acceptance of collective responsibility for all students (Hargreaves & Braun, 2012). Teachers reported increased use of differentiated instruction, more analysis and discussion of data to pinpoint needed interventions, greater cooperation between special education resource teachers and classroom teachers in relation to all students who struggled rather than only those with official identifications, and more use of assistive technologies for students with learning disabilities. Intensive site visits in all 10 districts corroborated these results and also revealed greater collaboration between curriculum and special education departments within districts that sometimes amounted to total integration. In general, educators reported a large movement from a culture of "my students" to "our students."

District leaders drove this strategy. They took a counterintuitive approach of providing identical funding to all 72 districts, regardless of their size. In a province where many districts were quite small and where even small amounts of extra resources could therefore make a great difference, this built a critical mass of district support. Larger districts eventually were persuaded to participate with their smaller counterparts by appealing to their historic symbolic status and the contribution they could make to the collective good of the province's students.

Responsibility for planning and implementation came under a core team of six key staff — retired district leaders and superintendents of curriculum or special education — who jointly developed project goals, designed an implementation strategy, and monitored participation and results. They did this by constantly connecting with and circulating among the districts, making necessary changes and refinements as they amassed evidence of what was working and what was not.

Like the GMC, district leaders did not believe that one-size-fits-all strategies were appropriate in a province where one in four schoolchildren were born outside of Canada, leading to several different strategies:

- In a district with high numbers of children from immigrant families, the project focused on early literacy initiatives like a summer head-start program for students new to the region and a "snuggle up and read" program involving parents or other family members.
- In a district serving a large student population of Old Order German-origin Mennonites whose community is characterized by mutual aid, commitment to collective self-sufficiency, and wearing traditional dress, children tended to leave school early to work on the farms, or, in the case of girls, to get married and have children. Standard efforts to enforce school attendance and improve high school completion would prompt families to move to other parts of their rural network throughout North America. So school leaders engaged with their culture, for example, by using the community's agricultural products for

children's lunches, meeting parents on street corners, carrying home their shopping, and building relationships to shift perceptions about the value of formal education.

- A remote rural district serving just 24 schools across an area the size of France had struggled with how to raise expectations for the 40% of children from aboriginal families (known in Canada as First Nations communities). Some educators believed that children from these communities could not learn, could barely speak, and mainly needed an emotionally safe and caring environment. The district's response was to coach teachers to use more specific, differentiated, and culturally appropriate teaching strategies, and to examine examples of student work among colleagues to demonstrate possibilities for student and teacher success.

Like the GMC, the Ontario special education project also stressed collective cross-district responsibility for all students' success. All 72 districts were involved. Collective responsibility began with teachers across grade levels and with special education and regular classroom assignments taking responsibility for struggling students and their progress together. The districts exercised collective responsibility, too, in how they shared strategies transparently at annual retreats where they presented their practices and results, in how they communicated with the steering committee, and in how they were connected by their team of mentors and monitors who were ensuring that intentions were being converted into action. These mentors and monitors did not have hierarchical supervisory authority over the districts and their leaders. Instead, these respected peers acted as a "third-party" force responsible for improvement, system learning, and, where needed, to challenge existing practice.

Ontario's special education reform was not only implemented by district leaders and special education superintendents; it was devised and driven by them. At the very beginning the executive director of the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) and a small group of his associates who acted on behalf of the 72 district leaders pointed out to the Ministry of Education that it already had allocated significant resources to other groups such as the teachers' unions. CODE therefore requested resources and authority of its own to lead improvements in special education.

Though some feared the district leaders and their organization might diverge from Ministry of Education policy, these leaders sought ways to integrate their own efforts with central government directions. The ministry itself took a clear role in steering (but not micromanaging) this district-driven change. It stated that the CODE special education project must address issues of underachievement and the need to narrow the achievement gap and that the project should be consistent with the guiding philosophy of a 2005 provincial report called *Education for All* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005).

Ontario's special education reform created a change design that improved education for all students across the system. It drove change from the middle instead of ordering it from the top. And instead of expecting districts to adopt uniform responses to a centralized reform strategy, the reform generated and galvanized local creativity and energy in order to respond flexibly to local needs and circumstances.

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Building on its improvements in literacy and high school graduation and the success of its reforms, Ontario is moving further forward to pursue broader, bolder goals that include achievement and equity in 21st-century skills, arts, sciences, and citizenship. It also is pursuing greater well-being in mental, emotional, and physical health (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). The Boston College team is now working with the 10 districts to lead from the middle, for the province, in relation to increasing students' and teachers' engagement, promoting their well-being and building positive, diverse identities among them.

Conclusion

In recent years, in too many countries, school districts have been driven to distraction and to near destruction by top-down changes that have undermined or bypassed their authority and also the communities they serve. There is clear evidence that districts can and should be a big part of a better future for children, if they're willing to embrace changes in their thinking and practice.

Large-scale success cannot be achieved if districts continue to act independently of one another. Leading from the middle, not just in the middle, can use

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the power of local solutions to diverse problems in an environment where schools work with schools and districts work with districts as they exercise collective initiative and responsibility for all students' success. This kind of leadership needn't be confined to districts and can encompass networks and other kinds of partnerships as well (Rincon-Gallardo & Fullan, in press). But collective responsibility is not just something districts should ask others to undertake. It is something that districts now have to take on themselves.

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"As you can see boys and girls, the alphabet comes in 'caps lock on' and *'caps lock off.'"*

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