

Foreword

By Michael Fullan

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Ben Levin knows more about how to improve high schools on a very large scale than anyone I know—because he has done it, thought about it, and done more. Best of all, his solution is not arcane and does not cost a lot of money.

Billions of dollars have been spent in the United States over the past 20 years to improve high schools, to no avail. The Gates Foundation bankrolled hundreds of experiments to produce small high schools with an emphasis on establishing learning communities. Ultimately, they declared failure and went on to something else. Chicago Public Schools attacked school improvement diligently since 1988 and were able to show good improvement in many elementary schools, but the lack of progress in high schools was not even worth writing about. In the meantime, high school dropout rates in the United States have been stuck at about a third of the students on the average, and over half for disadvantaged groups. President Obama has set an ambitious target of “becoming number one in the world again (as they were in 1980) in college graduation by 2020.” The problem is that nobody knows how to get there. Enter Ben Levin.

In this book, he does not back away from the problem. He first lays out the challenges, not pulling any punches. We need not only to aim high but also to have a plan to accomplish the highest aspirations. He identifies the gobs of money wasted on the wrong solutions, looks closely at why students don’t graduate, and examines why it is so hard to change high schools (their size, how

leadership must differ in high schools, their subject centeredness, great diversity of student progress, tracking and streaming, and a romantic view that individualism should carry the day).

After building on his experience, from being a precocious student leader and young school trustee some 40 years ago and through his academic career and two stints as deputy minister of education in two provinces, he has learned a great deal. He was able to help put this all together as deputy minister in Ontario from 2004 to 2007. Ontario, with its almost 900 public high schools, has been an unequivocal success story, moving from a flatlined graduation rate of 68% to its present 81% rate and still climbing. With his academic hat on, he made sure that research and learning were built into these efforts, and he has continued to study the wider research on high schools.

He distills what he has learned into four understandable and powerful pillars:

1. Know the status and progress of every student, and the reasons therein.
2. Provide a program that enables all students to achieve a good outcome.
3. Improve daily teaching and learning through specific, focused strategies.
4. Connect schools deeply to their local and broader communities.

Nothing fancy, dramatic, complex, costly, or requiring super-heroic principals or teachers in this mix. You have to read the chapters to get the details, but they are there in chapter and verse, and they are memorable and usable. Our work on whole-system reform is characterized by focus, precision, specificity, partnership, evidence-based results, and of course, “whole systemness.” We have written about it before (Levin, 2008; Fullan 2010a, 2010b), but until now nobody has captured in detail the high school reform part of it.

This work and this book are highly accessible. It is what (borrowing a term from Jeff Kluger) I have called “simplexity”—easy to grasp (the simple part), but difficult to put into practice (the

complex part). Within Levin's easy-to-say but hard-to-do strategy are the following components:

A plan (focused, specific, and concise)

Infrastructure and resources

Structures, systems, and processes

Dealing with resistance

Indicators of progress

Communicate often and openly

Dealing with distractions

Levin again provides the examples and meaning of putting these elements together. Above all, *More High School Graduates* furnishes both the vision and the strategies to realize it. You would be surprised how many documents on high school reform contain only the broad vision without any means of enacting it. The latter is in Levin's wheelhouse. Levin gives us hope that the big agenda of high school improvement on a very large scale within a short time period (five to seven years) is realistic if we only apply ourselves in the right way. He even gives us the 20-minute-a-day solution, which you can use tomorrow (but make sure it is buttressed by attention to the four pillars).

Get to action now on the pillars—in your own community but also state- and countrywide. Pay attention to the benchmarking performance of top-performing countries in the Programme for International Student Assessment/Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (PISA/OECD) such as Finland, Singapore, Canada. Levin has given us the insights and strategies to compete well in both the small local picture and in the larger national and international scene. *More High School Graduates*—read it and reap!