

Your IASB Discussion Guide for “Coherence: The *Right* Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts and Systems”



A discussion guide based on Michael Fullan’s and Joanne Quinn’s book, “Coherence: The *Right* Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts and Systems” (originally published in July 2015), with implications for the board team and bottom line guidance for boards; provided by the Iowa Association of School Boards.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Authors' Note

“It is time to make good on the promise of education...Public education is humankind’s future.” (p.1)



What is the book *Coherence* about?

The authors, Michael Fullan and Joanne Quinn, answer that question: “Our book is a story of how regular school systems can achieve remarkable and lasting success by focusing on the right things and staying with them.” (p. xii) The book speaks to bringing about system change, within reasonably short time lines, through the four drivers which comprise their Coherence Framework for change.

The four drivers are:

1. Focusing Direction: “Systemness,” focus on what the system must do to attain the moral imperative of equal education for all, regardless of background.

2. Cultivating Collaborative Cultures: Producing and supporting strong groups, united by purpose, to do the work.

3. Deepening Learning: A clear understanding of the process of learning, studying how deeper learning can be influenced and, as a result, assuring all students engage in relevant and meaningful learning.

4. Securing Accountability: Developing the capacity to secure accountability for results.

These four drivers are simultaneous and are all important. The authors suggest, “Think of each of the four components, the right drivers, as serving the other three.” (p. 11)

What does it take to achieve meaningful change?

Fullan and Quinn believe that meaningful change only happens when the system is clearly focused on a common purpose. Leadership “infuses capacity building into all levels and work of the system as it combines the four components.” (p. x) They believe this approach of “the four drivers propelling the system forward simultaneously, focused on the right things and

staying with them, has to be fostered by many leaders working individually and collectively.” (p. xi) All four drivers must be clearly utilized to accomplish a common purpose.

Implications and Discussion Questions for School Boards

Clearly, the board, as “system leaders,” must work on stating and communicating the common purpose. They must make decisions that promote and realize the promise of public education. How has your board been doing this? The book states, “It is human nature to rise to a higher call, if the problems are serious enough and if there is a way forward where they can play a role with others. Coherence-making is a pathway that does this.” (p. xi) The board can articulate and embody that higher call. Their actions at the board table will clarify how important the shared purpose and the work to achieve that purpose is to the system.

The authors challenge readers to: “Use our framework, but find your own pathway.” (p.15) Perhaps boards can begin to define their pathway by clearly defining the moral imperative, reviewing each of the drivers and considering how the drivers might function best in their school districts. Is your board willing to commit the time to do this work? How will you make realizing this work a part of your whole board meeting?

The board can articulate and embody the higher call.



What is Coherence?

"It is time to make good on the promise of public education. Our children need it, the public is demanding it, and indeed the world needs it to survive and thrive. Public education is humankind's future." (p. 1)
Coherence consists of the shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work—the big task of realizing the promise of public education for all.

Coherence is provided through purposeful action across the school system. It's "working on capacity, clarity, precision of practice, transparency, monitoring of progress, and continuous correction. All of this requires the right mixture of pressure and support." (p. 2) In Ontario, where the authors ideas have been developed, visitors are amazed at the consistency and specificity that emerges when people are asked about the main priorities of the system. They can "talk the walk." The shared purpose across all schools and all levels is clear in these conversations.

In coherent systems, capacity is built; people are given the tools to be effective at achieving the goals at hand, and, thus, good pedagogy (the art or science of teaching) is what teachers do every day. Collaboration develops social capital aimed at progress in student achievement. "A small number of ambitious goals are relentlessly pursued." (p. 7)

When asked what works, a change-agent superintendent stated: "You need to be preoccupied with focus." (p. 8)

Policy and beliefs are important in establishing direction for the system.

Implications and Discussion Questions for School Boards

The book states that, "When large numbers of people have a deeply understood sense of what needs to be done—and see their part in achieving that purpose—coherence emerges and powerful things happen." (p.1) This is the challenge for school boards, ensuring the whole system has a sense of what needs to be done. The moral imperative of public education is clear: That all children have an equal opportunity to succeed at high levels. In the authors' words, "...that deep learning is provided for all children regardless of background or circumstances." (p. 17)

The board must consider:

- How can your board make clear its commitment to the moral imperative and the belief that your school district is capable of meeting the challenge?
- How can your board express and provide support for that belief?

This book operates on the premise that focus comes alive through carrying out all four drivers. Any one alone is not enough. Policy and beliefs are important in establishing direction for the system. As the board considers the four drivers, the board can have a meaningful discussion around these four questions:

1. How can the board state policy and approve plans that move the district toward realization of the moral imperative?
2. How does the board encourage and support collaborative work that can make the policy and planning a reality?
3. How does the board support student achievement of deeper learning goals that do not supplant, but rather build on a solid foundation of basic skills?
4. How can the board secure accountability for policy and plans being carried out so that the moral imperative can be realized?

These are not easy questions. Even though they are interrelated, it helps to look at the drivers – one at a time.

The Bottom Line for Boards, Provided by IASB

The Coherence Framework provides an outline for consistency for the board and a guide for board discussion. As the board provides policy-level direction for the district in its mission of meeting the needs of all children, the framework provides a common language and sets of action for the board, administration and staff.

Chapter Two: Focusing Direction



How does a district develop and sustain the first right driver, **Focusing Direction**? Why is it so important?

The first driver, **Focusing Direction**, consists of four main elements:

1. Purpose Driven
2. Goals that Impact What Matters Most
3. Clarity of Strategy
4. Change Leadership

Purpose Driven

Fullan and Quinn state that “commitment to the moral imperative of education, ‘deep learning for all children regardless of background or circumstance’ would seem to be a natural fit for public schools.” (p.17)

There is a need for “focused direction that engages everyone with a shared moral purpose.” (p. 48) Districts must make purpose a part of the organization’s DNA; people must work together to build a deeper understanding of their shared moral purpose, a common language for communicating this purpose effectively, and deepening commitment.

While the moral imperative is vital, simply stating it is not enough. Ultimately, school leaders “will only realize their moral imperative by developing a small number of actionable and shared goals.” (p.19) Otherwise, “constant overload and fragmentation overwhelm moral purpose.” (p. 17)

Goals that Impact What Matters Most

A critical step in creating Focused Direction is to establish two or three ambitious goals and then persistently pursue them. Fullan and Quinn say that in districts and schools today, “The problem is not the absence of goals...but the presence of too many that are ad hoc, unconnected, and ever changing.” (p. 19) The authors define this as “initiativitis.” They describe what it takes to create focus and get real results:

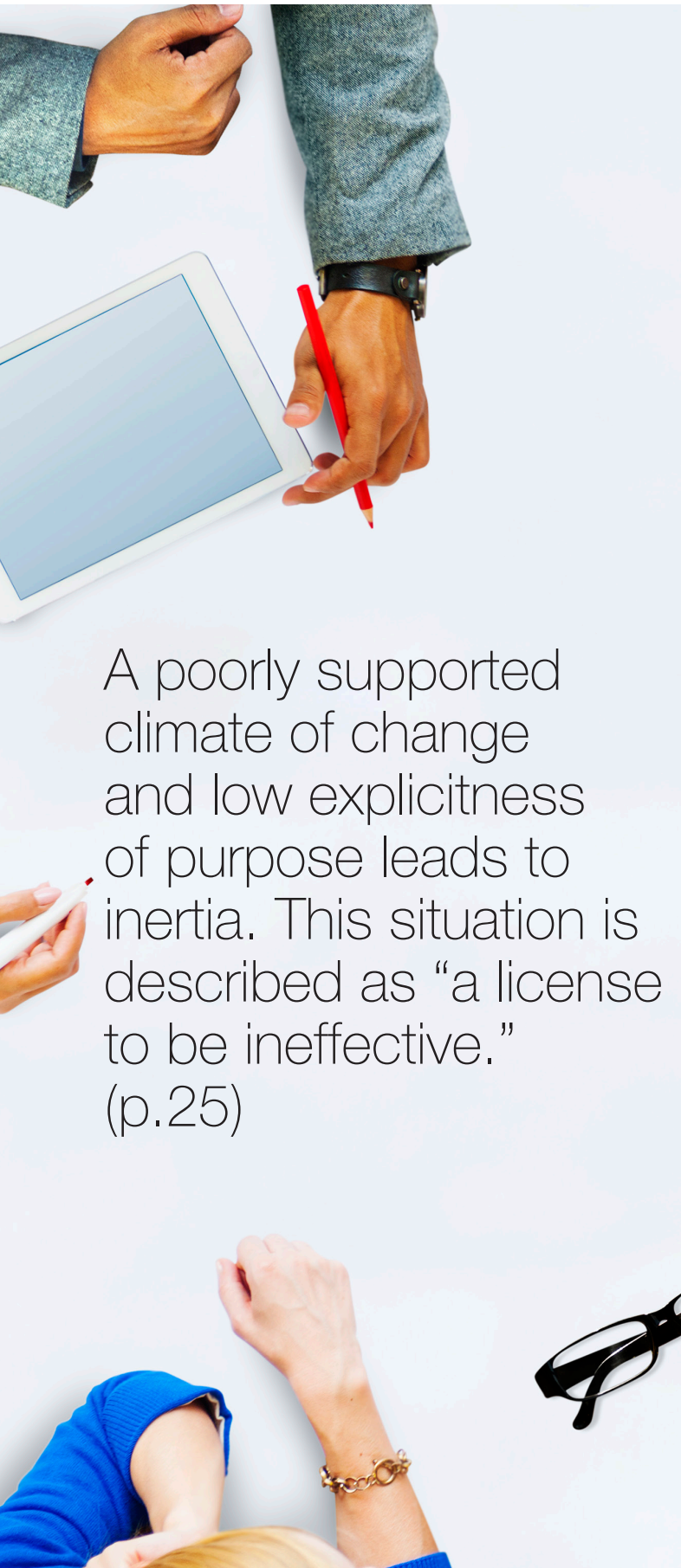
This scenario of overload and fragmentation is not uncommon...Figuring out what the small number of ambitious goals ought to be and staying focused on them is a challenge. This means reducing the number of goals and strategies, giving people experiences to show the integration...of the goals and strategies, learning as you go, and constantly reiterating the direction and how well you are progressing. Talking the walk is what we call this process. (p. 21)

This emphasis on focused goals aligns with the findings of IASB’s Lighthouse research study.

Clarity of Strategy

Establishing a sustained, persistent focus on a small number of actionable goals is vital. Creating clarity of strategy on how to meet those goals is just as critical. Clarity of strategy requires giving staff time and resources to learn new strategies and to build capacities in a safe, trusting environment. A strong climate for change builds trust and gives staff a safe environment for innovation. They have support for trying strategies which have clarity and measures of success.

A poorly supported climate of change and low explicitness of purpose leads to inertia. This situation is described as “a license to be ineffective.” (p. 25) Simply raising the climate of change may result in superficial change for change’s sake. Raising the explicitness of purpose without nurturing a climate of change may result in resistance to innovation or risk. A highly supportive climate of change combined with a very explicit purpose provides the best potential for successful, focused change. It promotes trust, clear communication, connectedness and meaningful work.



A poorly supported climate of change and low explicitness of purpose leads to inertia. This situation is described as “a license to be ineffective.” (p.25)

How can the board support the early leapers?

Change Leadership

Change Leadership is the fourth element of Focusing Direction. Change is a process, not an event. The authors use two fishbowls as a metaphor for change. To “make the leap” from the old fishbowl to the new (to make the leap of change), practitioners have to have confidence and competence. The very first thing that has to happen is to foster clarity of purpose for the leap. Then the system can support the early leapers, learn from them, build capacity to help others leap, create a culture of collaboration where leaping can be nurtured, and recognize the benefits of leaping. This metaphor creates a language for people to talk about what is happening in the system and what has to happen to support change.

Directional vision for change means developing and using shared purpose and vision for continuous conversations, “talking the walk.” Strong leaders and organizations seek out the early innovators and support them. They set directional vision, allow experimentation connected to the vision, put in mechanisms for learning from the work, and establish diffusion methods (ways to share promising approaches across the organization).

Change will never be finished in a rapidly changing world. “Leading for an unknown future” means fostering cycles of innovation, providing a culture of trust and exploration, and celebrating success. It also means providing communication pathways in the organization, both vertically and horizontally. (p. 32)

What Does it Take?

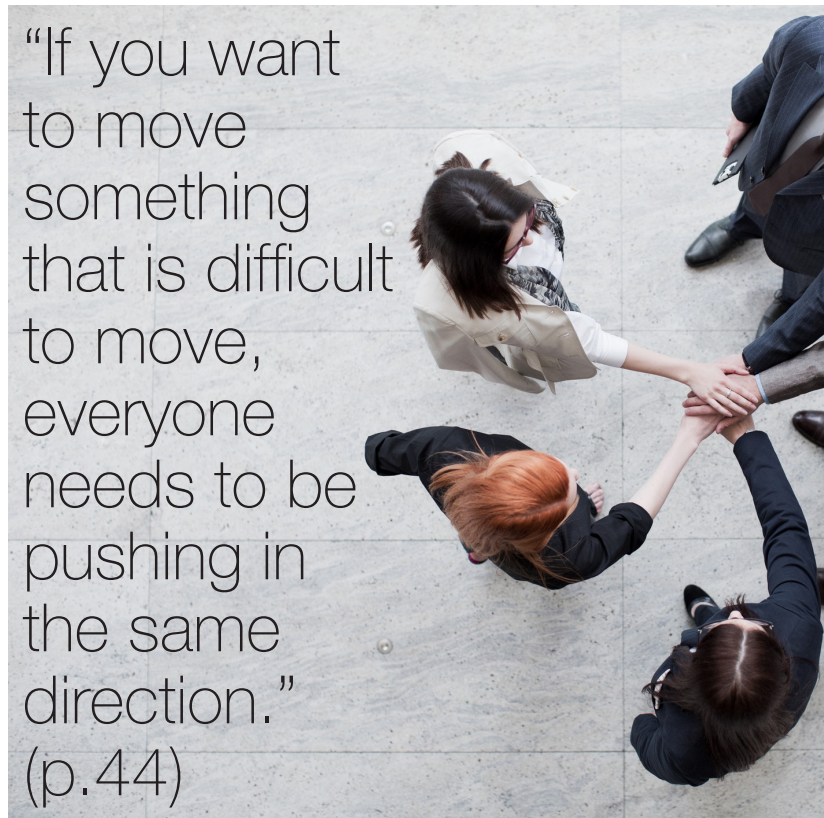
In the book, examples of schools and districts that have led change efforts aimed at providing challenging education for all students regardless of circumstance were united by:

- Clearly expressed, widely shared and persistently pursued goals
- A study of the data which allowed for increased focus and a celebration of success in the future
- Team members that united around and talked about the shared purpose
- Leadership that continually kept the shared purpose in view for the district

“If you want to move something that is difficult to move, everyone needs to be pushing in the same direction. It takes more than goals. It takes working on and sharing the strategy day after day.” (p. 44)

“If you want to move something that is difficult to move, everyone needs to be pushing in the same direction.”

(p.44)



Implications and Discussion Questions for School Boards

The fishbowl metaphor points out that actions of the board can be fatal to change efforts. If the board is constantly moving the overall goal or purpose (moving the fishbowl), does not provide support for confidence and competence, and fails to recognize the successes of change as they happen—this may destroy change efforts. Rather, the board can “work in partnership to develop a shared purpose and vision, and engage in continuous collaborative conversations that build shared language, knowledge, and expectations.” (p. 29) This provides the base for staff leadership to recommend, for board approval, a limited number of goals that will achieve the moral imperative described by the board. What does your board do to learn about the “why” behind change efforts? Why is this important and how can you do more?

Board members are traditionally proud of their school systems; that is a good thing. However, recognizing the importance of change, based on firm knowledge of what must happen to meet the needs of all children, is important work for the board. Understanding the process of change has to be coupled with clarity about the importance of change. This kind of conversation can be challenging at the board table. It takes time and commitment to benefit all students, but without this conversation and commitment, it will be difficult for the board to sustain support when challenges emerge. It takes leadership, courage and commitment to recognize the system must improve to meet the changing needs of students. What specific actions can your board take to focus on the district’s mission and goals at every meeting?

The Bottom Line for Boards, Provided by IASB

The authors state that, “leaders remain crucial in creating a North Star for action.” (p. 27) The creation of mission and vision and beliefs is a vital board responsibility that can energize and focus the system. The acknowledgment of the moral imperative, and the need for change to realize that imperative, is a foundational role for the board.

Chapter Three: Cultivating Collaborative Cultures



How does a district create and nurture collaborative culture and why is it so important?

“Collaborating is not just about creating a place where people feel good but rather about cultivating the expertise of everyone to be focused on a collective purpose.” (p. 75)

“The combination of rapid change, emerging technologies and global complexity requires new processes for knowledge building...We need leaders who create a culture of growth.” (p. 47) Reaching the moral imperative for an entire system is going to require people working together and getting the “know how” to do what needs to be done to improve student learning. A “collective shaping and reshaping of ideas and solutions that forges deep coherence across the system.” (p. 47)

Cultivating **Collaborative Cultures** is comprised of the following elements:

1. Culture of Growth
2. Learning Leadership aka Lead Learners
3. Capacity Building
4. Collaborative Work

Culture of Growth

The first of four elements that cultivate a collaborative culture is ensuring a culture of growth. The authors compare the atmosphere created by two television shows: Survivor, where a pool of volunteers fight to be the leader of the pack; and The Voice, where a pool of volunteers are given coaches to enhance their natural talents, and all improve and work together. The book notes that often school districts assume the only way they can grow is through bringing in an outside expert or a new administrator from another state to jump-start improvement. This strategy sends the message that we don't have the people or the expertise in our district to do the job. They caution that the system should seek good ideas externally, but the solutions should come from those within the system studying the needs and selecting possible solutions.

Implications and Discussion Questions for School Boards

The authors quote an old saying: "Actions speak so loudly no one can hear my words." (p. 53) What message does the board send about its belief in its own staff to work together and seek pathways to high levels of learning for all students?

The board can use time at the table to assure staff that it has a belief in staff's ability to organize around the unique student needs in their district and to select appropriate learning experiences to meet those needs. How does your board work to understand staff learning and the impact it has on student learning. If the board creates the impression that it can fire its way into excellence, it is undermining its own ability to sustain a collaborative culture. Does the staff understand what the board needs to learn at a governance level and prepare staff reports accordingly? Can your board commit to learning about the work for improvement in teaching and learning in your school district? What specifics will the board expect to know regarding every initiative?

What message is the board sending about believing in its own staff?

Learning Leadership, aka Lead Learners

The second element in cultivating a collaborative culture is Learning Leadership. There is a need for principals to be learners themselves and participate in staff learning experiences. Research speaks to the importance of the principal's instructional leadership role in promoting inquiry habits of mind, learning from the work and together, with staff, engaging in solving authentic problems of implementation. In systems that improve, the work of lead learners is more focused on support for student learning and using data to diagnose learning needs than it is on tools for performance appraisal.

Implications and Discussion Questions for School Boards

“Culture has been defined as the way we do things around here.” What message about district culture and values is the board sending when it hears reports from principals at the board table? Does the board's reaction to reports reward achievement but ignore learning? The board can hear and discuss reports about building-level work in reaching for the moral imperative. Does the board focus only on learning about the principal's role in teaching evaluation and student discipline, thus sending the message that they believe these are the primary building-level leadership roles? As a result, do they expect, as Harvard Professor Richard Elmore has cautioned, that everyone should know what to do without having the opportunity to learn how to do it? The board's respect for the principal's role as a lead learner can be reflected by their questions and learning from reports at the board table. What kind of “frame” can your mission and beliefs provide for administrative reporting to the board?

When reviewing the district budget, the board needs to view resources provided for staff learning (both time and money) as efforts to cultivate a collaborative culture. The board should recognize staff learning as a necessary link to reaching the moral imperative. Regular reports on professional development and the culture of learning being built and sustained can result in clear, main messages being shared with the public. After receiving those reports the board should be able to say, “This is important and this is why. Now, what do you need from us?” Can your board identify board policy that supports ongoing staff learning experiences rather than “one and done” methods of learning? Can your board agree upon and communicate their belief in the importance of staff development to the public? What does the staff and public learn about board values from your receipt of their reports at the board table? What can you do to improve those messages?

Capacity Building

Capacity building is the third element in supporting a collaborative culture. This involves “increasing collective focus and corresponding capacities to learn together as well as make an impact on learning across the district.” (p. 60) The authors observe that capacity building is an approach, not a program. The key to capacity building is “developing a common knowledge and skill base across all leaders and educators in the system.” (p. 57) Research points out the importance of having high expectations for each student and a collective efficacy to get there. One without the other is not enough. Forming capacity-building teams that work across groups and within groups will help support a community of learners where everyone has clear goals and something to contribute. A main feature of capacity building is sustained focus and commitment to the strategy for achievement over multiple sessions.

“The key to capacity building is developing a common knowledge base across all leaders...” (p. 57)



Collaborative Work

The first three elements of cultivating a collaborative culture support the final element of collaborative work. "Improving whole systems requires everyone to shift their practice." (p.60) Success of working together builds a culture of sustained collaborative effort aimed at achieving the imperative of all children learning, regardless of circumstance. Two elements here are meaningful learning and work:

- Deeply designed learning about effective instructional practices
- Collaborative learning and work; learning done and analyzed with others

If the depth of learning is simply awareness of practice and the learning is solely individual, it remains at the surface level of learning and will not result in changed practice. If the depth of learning remains at a level of simple awareness, adding the element of group involvement may build relationships but will result in frustration at being unable to utilize learning in meaningful ways. This is the "bring in an expert for a one-shot workshop" practice. Having a high level of learning and work that results in improved practice for an individual without collaborative learning may improve performance within a single classroom but will not improve the system as a whole.

True change in instructional practice takes place only when strong collaborative work is combined with meaningful learning experiences. "If one wants to shift district practices, one needs to have a strong learning design and deeper collaborative work." (p. 62)

Implications and Discussion Questions for School Boards

Questions for the board to ask itself about the board's impact on culture include:

- What specific actions can the board take to encourage and sustain the focus on learning experiences for staff that builds a true community of learners and a culture that fosters improvement of practice as the norm and not the exception?
- How does the board learn about, and then talk about, staff learning and its link to reaching the moral imperative?
- What does the board say when the community questions the need for staff development days?

Promising Approaches

The authors present research-based, promising approaches in different systems which provide concise validation for collaborative work as a key to district improvement. The common strategies are focused goals, developing capacity, precision of pedagogical practice, measurable impact on student learning and sound leadership. One powerful model was described as "focusing transparently on a clear target in a way that motivates and builds capacity across the school." (p. 66) They also suggest virtual connections that allow anytime, anywhere connections between staff members of different districts across district lines "engaging many more people and casting a broader net." (p. 70)

The board should be able to identify board policy that supports ongoing staff learning.

Implications and Discussion Questions for School Boards

What does this chapter suggest for the work of area education agencies in uniting districts in working and learning together? What kinds of questions can boards ask to support intra-district learning?

This chapter focuses on collaborative work as a key driver in shifting behavior. It's about engaging people in challenging work and giving them collaborative power to build a better future for themselves and their students.

Boards must not be "looking for a silver bullet" or jump from initiative to initiative. (p. 79) Boards must be prepared to understand the reasoning behind improvement efforts and the importance of staying the course.

The Bottom Line for Boards, Provided by IASB

The board's actions speak very clearly in regard to this driver. The board's reaction to the need for staff learning and the need for time to learn and work together reflects their commitment to the moral imperative of all children learning regardless of circumstance. Their words at and away from the table have a great power to support or to undermine a collaborative culture. The formation of that culture begins as board members learn together about staff collaboration and the power of improving staff potential to release the potential of all students.

Chapter Four: Deepening Learning



“Teachers and students become partners in the learning process.” (p. 87)

How does a district deepen the learning for both students and staff to help them meet the challenges of a changing world?

The concept of **Deepening Learning** is two-fold. Fullan and Quinn say, “We must shift to a deeper understanding of the process of learning and how we can influence it. This requires knowledge building partnerships for everyone engaged. (p. 108) This is the huge challenge that the authors set forth in this chapter, and it is a challenge that must be met if students are to be prepared for citizenship in a changing world.

The authors begin by establishing the challenge. Recent studies show that at least half of students are not engaged in our schools, and that by the time they reach ninth-grade, less than 40 percent of students are enthusiastic about being in school. This portrays a huge societal problem: if our students are not engaged and excited about learning, how can we expect them to be the life-long learners we want and need them to be as contributing adult citizens? If learning is seen as boring and useless, unconnected to a better future, school districts will have failed in the moral imperative.

Fullan and Quinn describe their “stratosphere agenda” which would link change knowledge (knowledge about how to mobilize individuals and groups as they innovate) to knowledge about what works in pedagogy and digital learning. This agenda would shape a new kind of education in which the focus is shifted from teaching or inputs to a deeper understanding of the process of learning and how we can influence it. “It shifts the role of the teacher from the keeper of knowledge to an activator of deep, meaningful learning.” (p. 87) The teacher is not simply a facilitator of learning but an activator of learning. Students take responsibility for their learning and their learning goals. This would result in a highly motivating school system capable of reaching the moral imperative of all students experiencing deep learning.

Fullan and Quinn describe three critical elements of “doing” that create deepened learning:

- 1) Develop clarity of learning goals.
- 2) Build precision in pedagogies accelerated by digital learning.
- 3) Shift practices through capacity building.

Develop Clarity of Learning Goals

The first key to realizing a highly motivating school experience which allows all students to reach high levels of deeper learning is clarity of learning goals. The researchers describe six goal areas that can be clarified into deep learning competencies. The six goals, known as the 6C’s, are: Communication, Critical Thinking, Collaboration, Creativity, Character and Citizenship.

The overall purposes of these six goals are “the well-being of the whole student, and also the well-being of the group and society as a whole.” (p. 85) Deeper learning positions students to be able to think deeply and independently and take an active role in their own education. Fullan and Quinn say in this framework, “The distinction between living and learning and schooling becomes blurred. Students are living and creating their own lives and futures through understanding and attempting to solve problems in their community and globally.” (p. 87)

The authors say that in order to “mobilize concerted action and a deep shift in practice,” systems must spend time clarifying what these deeper learning goals look like in practice, identify instructional strategies that foster these competencies and find effective ways to measure them.



“Students from all circumstances must believe they can achieve and also feel that others believe that.” (p. 96)

Build Precision in Pedagogy

The second element of deeper learning is building precision in pedagogy or instruction. This means developing collective instructional capacity so students are not just engaged in “pockets of excellence” classrooms, but every teacher has an opportunity to develop pedagogical skills in a learning environment that promotes deep learning. This means “building teacher capacity to identify the interrelated pieces of learning and more importantly to develop precision in how to combine them or make them gel to meet the varying needs of learners.” (p. 89) There are strategies appropriate to developing the foundational learning of basic skills knowledge, but students must also

be able to engage in deeper learning to use that foundational learning meaningfully and develop it fully to prepare them for functional citizenship.

“Deeper learning is the ability to understand concepts, think critically, solve problems, and apply learning in authentic ways.” (p. 92) Structuring learning environments to support this deeper learning and leveraging digital tools to accelerate the learning is a necessary challenge. Teachers must be supported in working together to develop these skills. Student learning must become “my learning”. Students need to build meta cognition (higher-order thinking that enables understanding, analysis and control of one’s cognitive processes) about their own learning and define their own learning goals and success criteria. Teachers need to provide students with opportunities for deep learning, give immediate feedback, and activate the next learning challenges. High expectations are a key determinant of success. Students from all circumstances need the opportunity to develop aspirations and have the learning environments that help them realize those aspirations. This is the equity challenge of public education. Fullan and Quinn challenge districts to “consider the degree to which they are providing conditions that support this kind of learning environment.” (p. 97)

Shift Practices Through Capacity Building

The final key to realizing deep learning is to shift practices through capacity building. Districts need to identify processes that will support a shift in practice for all educators. Systems that achieve this “shape a culture that fosters an expectation of learning from everyone, taking risks and making mistakes but learning from them. They build capacity vertically and horizontally in the organization with persistence and single mindedness until it affects learning.” (p. 100) They have plans and resources in place that support a shift to a deeper understanding of the process of learning.

Fullan and Quinn cite several descriptive examples of how schools, districts and states have achieved greater coherence resulting in dramatic

What can the board do to nurture learning environments that help all students reach their aspirations?

results in student learning. From this work the authors observed patterns that aligned with their Coherence Framework. Each of the examples “... had a clear and shared focused direction. They articulated a small number of goals directly linked to improved student learning and then persisted in working toward them....In every case, this was not a simple solution but a concerted effort of committed leadership at all levels over multiple years.” (p. 106)

The authors have worked with schools that focused on improving foundational learning so they could get to the level of deeper learning. They also have a wealth of research around schools striving to actualize deeper learning throughout the system. They have seen dramatic results using “pedagogical precision and capacity building.” (p. 101)

The Bottom Line for Boards, Provided by IASB

Challenging times call for courageous work on the part of the whole system. If education needs to change in order to fulfill its responsibilities to all students, the board cannot ignore the challenge. The board must approve and support strategies to empower revolutionary transformation in learning across the system: learning how to learn in new ways and at a deeper level. The Coherence Framework provides a structure for district planning and action to meet the challenge. This planning and action will need board understanding and support to be part of district culture.

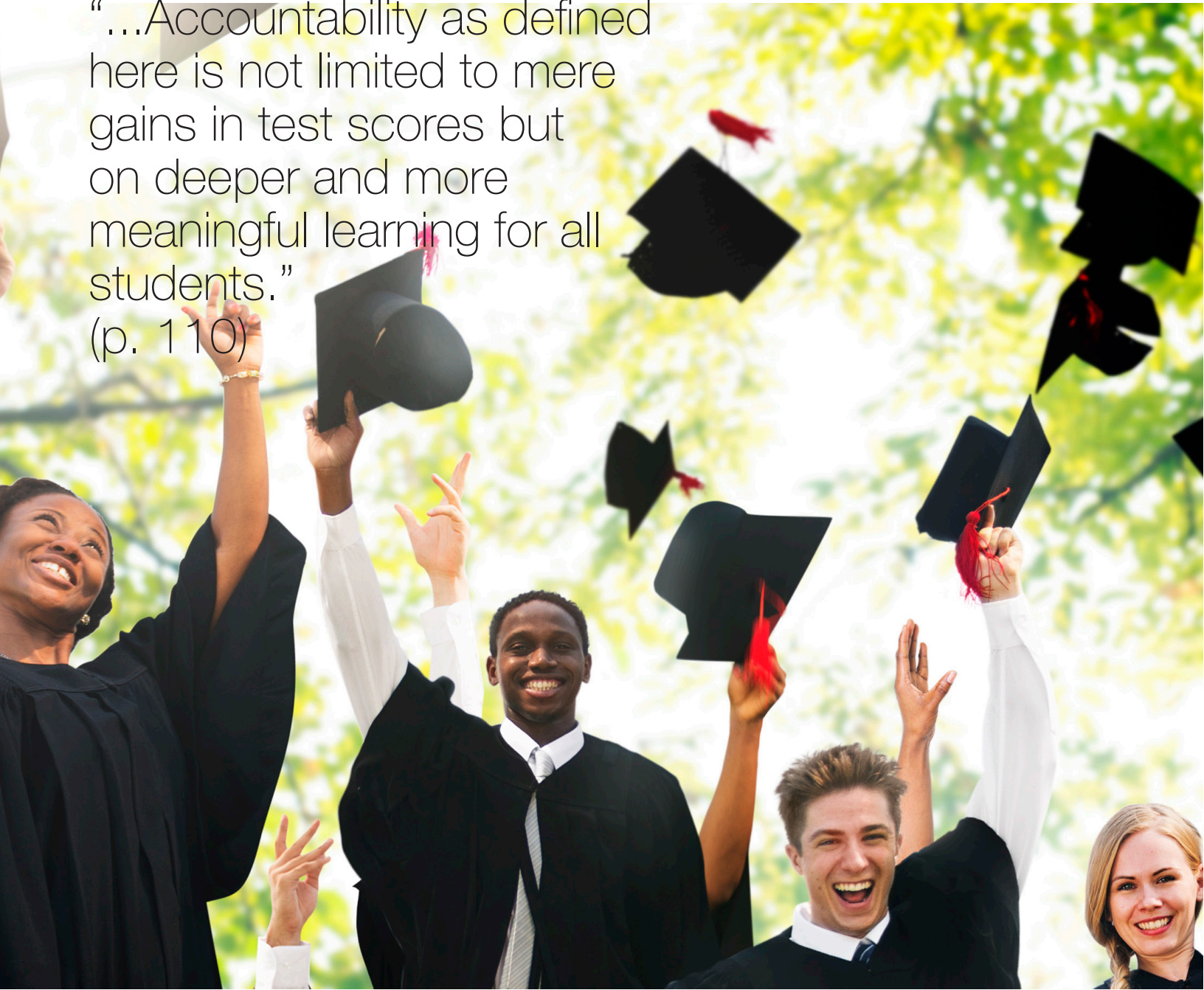
Implications and Discussion Questions for School Boards

This chapter poses four district-level questions designed to foster meaningful board discussion:

1. Does the district have clarity of learning goals? (Does the board know them? Do they hear about them at the board table? Can they talk about them when making decisions?)
2. Have high-yield pedagogical practices been identified and shared? (Does the board know that the staff is learning how to provide an environment that activates deep learning, which allows students to problem-solve, collaborate and realize their own goals? What do they need to know about this? What do they need to be able to describe for the public?) How will the board commit to communicating clearly with each other and the public? What main messages will they decide upon?
3. Does the district create a culture of learning for all educators? (Is the board itself an example of learning? Does it take time to understand the learning goals of the system, to hear how those learning goals link to the district vision and mission and to encourage reporting on the goals from staff and students?) What learning goal can your board set for itself?
4. Does the district provide resources for collaborative learning structures and processes to thrive? (Does the board ask what those structures are and how they can create policy and plans to support them?) How, specifically, can the board encourage change?

Chapter Five: Securing Accountability

“...Accountability as defined here is not limited to mere gains in test scores but on deeper and more meaningful learning for all students.”
(p. 110)



How does a district ensure that people are holding themselves accountable for their performance and for learning improvement?

Fullan and Quinn point out that this work requires initiative, judgment and ongoing commitment. Therefore, the usual “carrots and sticks” approach does not work. For accountability to work well in a system, you have to build both internal and external accountability.

If you want effective accountability, you need to develop conditions that maximize internal accountability – conditions that increase the likelihood that people will be accountable to themselves and to the group. Second, you need to frame and reinforce internal accountability with external accountability – standards, expectations, transparent data, and selective interventions. (p. 109)

Internal Accountability and External Accountability

“Simply stated, accountability is taking responsibility for one’s actions. At the core of accountability in educational systems is student learning.” (p. 110) Ensuring deeper learning for **all** students is the most important responsibility there is for an entire school system.

In other words, internal accountability occurs when both groups and individuals assume responsibility for continuous improvement and collectively focus on system-wide beliefs and goals. To do this will require complete attention to the first three drivers of the Coherence Framework. The authors hold that Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, and Deepening Learning all build individual accountability as people in the system develop shared goals and aspirations for students and the system.

On the other hand, external accountability occurs when school leaders inform and reassure the public through “transparency, monitoring and selective intervention” that their schools are living up to community performance expectations. (p. 111) The authors say that building internal accountability first, before developing external accountability, achieves greater success and should be the priority of the board. In fact, Fullan and Quinn contend that external accountability will be “far more effective if [policy makers] get the internal part right.” (p. 111)

What happens when systems focus solely on external accountability? Researchers, including Richard Elmore, conclude that external accountability alone does not result in the combination of individual responsibility, collective responsibility and corrective action that internal accountability can bring. Simply holding the individual teacher responsible, from outside pressure, will not result in increased student learning. Transparent data on instructional practices and student achievement are necessary features of cultures with internal accountability. (p. 111)

As an example, Elmore cites a specific school with a collaborative culture in which “teachers described an atmosphere of high expectations and stressed a priority of reaching every child.” (p. 113) He draws the conclusion that “investing in the conditions that develop internal accountability is more important than beefing up external accountability.”



One successful practitioner shared this response with Elmore when asked: “What is effective accountability?” “Teachers talk about monitoring differently. As they engage in greater sharing of the work, they talk about being accountable as people in the school community, knowing what they are doing and looking to see what is changing for students as a result...they continue to deprivatize teaching, (and) talk about their principal and peers coming into their classrooms and expecting to see the work of agreed upon practices reflected in their teaching.” (p. 116) All adults in the system feeling deeply accountable for each child’s learning is a powerful lever for district improvement.

Accountability in Action

The book provides examples of cases where race, ethnicity and income were not seen as determiners or having impact on student achievement because the system assumed internal accountability.

“The more that internal accountability thrives, the greater the responsiveness to external requirements and the less externals have to do.” (p. 118) He notes that the assumption of internal accountability will aid in reaching external (state or national) goals, but stresses the importance of local control and local accountability. “(Systems) need to invest in establishing conditions for greater local responsibility... this means investment in resources and mechanisms of internal accountability that people can use to collaborate within their units and across them.” (p. 119) It is important to monitor all of organizational health. Focusing on just the external indicators may lead to ignoring what really needs to happen in school improvement.

“At the core of accountability in educational systems is student learning.” (p.110)

Implications and Discussion Questions for School Boards

The board needs to consciously encourage the development of shared, system-wide, internal accountability. Self-assessment of the board's responsibility for this internal accountability could include:

- In what ways has the board made clear its high expectation that all children will succeed at high levels?
- What specific supports has the board provided for all staff to develop ways to achieve these high expectations and shared measures of accountability?
- Do policy and planning provide time and visionary support for staff to develop individual and collective responsibility for learning, or does the board say, "Get it done," without providing supports?
- How does the board ask for understandable reporting at the board table on established measures?

The board's agenda must include regular opportunities to receive data and time for board discussion. The board should avoid blaming behaviors: "If those elementary teachers would just teach reading better we wouldn't have to hear about these problems for our secondary students!"

What are some meaningful questions your board can ask that will help demystify data? Can the board look at data in the context of all students learning what they need to know for effective citizenship? Can these types of questions become a frame for data reporting? How can your board be sure the data relates to the overall promise of public education and inquire about what supports are needed for proactive change? How does your board monitor and hold itself accountable for making an effective contribution to the district?

Accountability means working on the "first three components of the Coherence Framework: Focusing Direction, Cultivating Collaborative Cultures, and Deepening Learning are tantamount to establishing the conditions for individuals and the group to be accountable to themselves" (p. 124) It means taking the big picture vision for the system seriously, providing opportunity for it to be realized and encouraging those responsible for learning to provide proof of progress.

The board's agenda must include regular opportunities to receive data and time for board discussions.

The Bottom Line for Boards, Provided by IASB

By law, the board is required to take notice of external accountability measures. However, the board cannot ignore the need to support and monitor internal accountability through its attention to local goals and mission. When the board sets its own team goals – tied to district goals – and conducts self-assessment of these goals, these actions model and instill internal accountability.

Chapter Six: Leading for Coherence and Conclusion

“There has never been a more important time to be your own leader. Be a coherence maker in chaotic times!” (p.138)



How does a district provide leadership to master the framework in ways that will make a difference for students?

“You have to focus on the right things but you also must learn as you go.” (p. 127) “Joint learning is what happens in effective change processes.” (p. 138) Leaders learn as they lead. Great leaders will build coherence when they combine the four elements of the Coherence Framework and apply it to the complex organization they lead.

Fullan and Quinn importantly and definitively state that coherence is a “forever job,” as people come and go and, thus, the situational dynamics are in flux. They identify a main threat to coherence: turnover at the top with new leaders who come in with their own agendas. This means discontinuity of direction, with new leaders disrupting rather than building on ongoing initiatives. This necessitates ongoing study of the Coherence Framework as the publicly elected board changes.

Implications and Discussion Questions for School Boards

How does looking at these four right drivers help your board make sense of its role as leaders in the complex organization of a public school district?

On Change

How does the board “manage itself” for change? As elected public officials there will be change on school boards. How does the board provide for orientation of new members? How clearly can the board state mission and beliefs that drive the district toward the moral imperative of all students learning what they need to know regardless of background or situation? How do new board members become acquainted with these beliefs and establish ownership in them? This takes time in busy board schedules. It is a necessary investment of board time for the forever job of a coherent system.

Mastering the Coherence Framework

To master the framework it will be important to think of each driver as you work with any single component of the framework. They all impact each other.

Now that you have studied the entire framework, what steps will you take to ensure continuity of purpose? How will you make sure you consider all parts of the framework as you drill down on any single part? As you look at the four drivers, can you, as a board, describe how each part is interacting with the other parts in your district? The board must plan for its own learning and development time.

Leadership Competencies

The authors also outline important leadership competencies for whole system improvement. These include: challenging the status quo; building trust through clear communications and expectations; creating a commonly owned plan for success; focusing on team over self; having a high sense of urgency for change and sustainable results; committing to continuous improvement; and building external networks/partnerships. (p. 133) An important message here is that these leadership competencies cannot be the “job” of one person in the system. Leadership competencies must be developed in leaders at all levels of the system. Investment must be made in leadership development, and the developed leadership must be focused around the goals of the system.

Fullan and Quinn say school leaders must participate as learners. This means being open to change and learning with others. They present an assessment tool (p. 131-132) that allows a district to determine what evidence they have of the components of the Coherence Framework.

- **Fostering Direction:** Does the district have a shared purpose driving action; a small number of goals tied to student learning; a clear strategy for achieving goals that is known by all; and is change knowledge used to move the district forward?
- **Creating Collaborative Cultures:** Is there a growth mind-set in district culture; do leaders model learning; is collective capacity building fostered above individual development; and are structures and processes in place, supporting intentional collaboration on work toward the shared purpose?
- **Deepening Learning:** Are learning goals clear to everyone and do they drive instruction; is there a known set of effective pedagogical practices being used; and are robust processes (such as collaborative inquiry and examining student work) used regularly to improve practice?
- **Securing Accountability:** Is capacity building used to continuously improve results; is underperformance used as an opportunity for growth, not blame; and are external accountability measures used transparently to benchmark progress?

Implications and Discussion Questions for School Boards

How can your board encourage a Coherence assessment in your school district? In what ways does the board support the development of leadership competencies in its staff and in the board itself?

The Coherence challenge is to provide radical transformation into deep learning for students and for systems of public education. Policy makers must shift away from relying on the wrong drivers and move toward the drivers described in Coherence. They must establish a learning culture in which many people are expected to develop leadership skills and help others do the same. The results will be “greater and sustainable whole system performance.” (p. 136) Fullan and Quinn challenge readers to “Be the connector that activates them.” (p. 137) “There has never been a more important time to be your own leader. Be a coherence maker in chaotic times!” (p. 138)

This is the challenge for your board:

- Can you focus your time and work at the board table in ways that make a positive difference for children?
- Can you devise ways to increase district coherence for your work at the board table and your communication with the public?

The Bottom Line for Boards, Provided by IASB

Learning about and discussing the Coherence Framework can make a difference for your board and your school district. Your board can be a coherence leader and be a catalyst for a system which better meets the needs of all children. There is no higher calling. Your board can do this work. IASB can help.