

**Hon. Dave Hancock, Minister of Education**  
**International Education Roundtable in Singapore**  
**Trip Report**  
**July 4 to 12, 2009**

**Preparation for the Future**

All of the ministers present found common agreement that improving public sector productivity is an imperative. Even if systems are really good now, standing still won't be enough to meet the challenges to come. It is possible to drive towards a high performing education system that is good enough for today, but miss the point that it is the education of the future that is necessary. Public perceptions about the nature of a good education for the modern context are actually dragging systems back -- this is a particular challenge in Hong Kong, the United States, and England.

Our discussions highlighted the fact that education systems that perform less well are those that have a series of initiatives without an underlying strategy. Reform efforts must be mindful of time; some changes may take much longer than others, yet this is often forgotten. Stability of leadership and clarity on authority are also essential during reform periods. Political stability was also seen as a contributor to high education system performance. However, central government bureaucracies are often not reforming themselves even as they try to make changes in the system; without that, it is hard to get effective delivery and implementation of new practices.

**Importance of High Standards**

Another area of common agreement was that high performing school systems do not accept that students can fall behind. Bronwyn Pike, the Minister of Education for Victoria, Australia, noted that, "We can't afford to leave children behind, not just because it's bad for them, but because we can't afford them in a knowledge-based society." When a child falls behind, the teacher should ask herself, "How do I teach this content differently so that this child learns it?" rather than accepting that the student is falling behind.

It is politically difficult to talk about high standards for everyone; Michael Barber noted that in England, this is always construed by the media as a lowering down of standards. However, a high floor for all should not become a ceiling preventing the most talented students from achieving exceptional performance.

There was a recognition that high quality does not mean every student comes out alike, or at the same time. Vocational training was raised in this context, as many systems had focused nearly all their energies on preparing students for university entry. Unleashing students means having systems that give credit on the basis of performance, not on the basis of seat time. The assessment process should allow students to demonstrate very high levels of competence when they are ready.

**21st Century Curriculum**

Michael Barber, a former policy advisor to Tony Blair, suggested that schools of the future must: guide students to develop the knowledge that everyone needs; develop the ability to think in

disciplined ways (a reference to Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner's work that argues there are nine types of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalist, interpersonal, intrapersonal, existential); and encourage leadership in the sense of the ability to influence others, manage one's own life, and shape their community. All of this requires an ethical underpinning, which is the values needed for success in the 21st century. The point of education is to prepare students to learn beyond their current knowledge base. Suffice to say, schools of the future must do things that are not measured on TIMMS and PISA tests; however, PISA is a good step to the next level because it explicitly attempts to generalize knowledge to new situations.

Hong Kong was recognized as having done a very good job of reforming its curriculum to prepare students for the 21st century. Hong Kong Secretary for Education Michael Suen noted that students have got to adapt to the challenges ahead by being life-long learners. In his view, it will therefore be important to train students in how to select things: they are faced with a lot of knowledge that they have to be able to digest, think through and organize, and draw up plans and present it.

In the new Hong Kong curriculum, students will be examined on four core subjects: Chinese, English, mathematics and liberal studies, then another two electives for university entrance. The point is to emphasize diversity in the curriculum so that students will access areas that will prepare them for lifelong learning. The hope is, for instance, to get someone who wants to pursue medicine interested in music or languages, so that later they are able to continue their lifelong learning exercise. However, lifelong learning is about substantially more than curriculum. One of the biggest challenges in Hong Kong's curriculum reform effort was helping parents understand what the change was doing.

Michael Barber observed that, broadly speaking, the school system is behind the 21st century, and the parents are often thinking of the paradigm that they were educated in -- a 30 year time lag.

### **High Performing School Systems**

Schools are facing increasing expectations that they will "do their part", although that is not explained in clear terms. There is a tendency to leave everything to the school, because that is the most convenient place. Teaching is seen as a substitute for parenting. It is difficult to raise satisfaction with teaching when the expectations are so enormous.

Good schools have something they are really passionate about. There is evidence that systems that devolve a lot of funding and responsibility to their schools, like Alberta's, perform very well. This has an effect on the management of change at the local system level. Teachers often cope with change by hunkering down and hoping that their teaching will not be affected.

School leaders must be able to get teachers on board. This requires strong leadership at the local level that focuses on pedagogy, rather than administration. Michael Barber noted that an analysis in England of why teachers were leaving the profession showed it was not about pay, but the quality of school leadership. School leaders are not administrative managers, but leaders of learning.

Data transparency is also an emerging trend in high performing school systems. The Finnish system excels in this; Ontario and Australia have been moving towards this; and it is a major issue in Sweden and the United States. Transparency was seen as a way to start conversations; Dr. Ng Eng Hen, Minister of Education in Singapore, noted that "to change behaviour, we find you really have to make it count."

### **High Performing Teaching and School Leadership**

Teaching quality is the most important determinant of student outcomes. There are profound differences between student outcomes with low and high-performing teachers. High performing systems define high standards of excellence in teaching practice and school leadership. Teacher preparation is increasingly school-based and practical; this is the best way to bring the reality of the school to the teaching students so that when they move into teaching, they are effective in dealing with today's realities. Some high-performing systems invest heavily in professional development; this in-service training is increasingly collaborative, data-driven and facilitated, all with a focus on classroom practice.

Assessing teacher and principal performance begins with clearly articulated performance indicators. Across the OECD, a surprising number of teachers do not receive regular, systematic appraisal or feedback; however, when it is received, it usually increases job satisfaction. There needs to be consensus about what teaching practice involves and does not involve. When professional groups like those in health have a high standard of practice, and members deviate from that practice, the full force of the profession comes down on them, but this is not generally true of teaching.

The context of the learning environment is also important. A good teacher in one school may not be a good teacher in another place.

### **Effective Use of Information and Communications Technology**

Education has seen a lot of investment in information and communication technology, and it is taken as a given that it produces improvement. Yet unlike the business world, this investment has not transformed practices. There are a number of obstacles to effective ICT use in schools. School leaders' support for ICT is variable, but crucial to teachers' use of it. The discussion should not be about unleashing the potential of ICT, but about unleashing the potential of the student to be an active guide of his or her own learning. The point is to align technology with the learning process.

An OECD report on Finland identified integration with curriculum, enrolling leaders, and overcoming inertia as challenges to effectively scaling ICT innovation. Hong Kong and Alberta are relatively unique in having explicit ICT learning expectations for their students. Like most innovations, technology is a double-edged sword: depending on how it is used, it can be a great learning tool, or bore students senseless.

ICT is largely about improving quality by offering immediate feedback so that things are done a little better than they might have been otherwise. This marginal improvement happens instead of a big leap because curriculum has not been changed to integrate ICT. Studies suggest that we can accelerate learning because we are now putting it under the control of the students. The most

powerful part of a feedback loop is letting a student know when they have not learned the material and why they have not learned it. Turning the pace and control over to students will motivate them to learn the material in ways that have not been seen before. Technology has the power to give feedback to the system which opens up a vast analytical ability.

The state of Victoria in Australia has been developing a system called the UltraneT that is a knowledge management framework that parents, students and teachers can use to create, store, share and collaborate. When swine flu hit and schools were closed, this system meant that education did not come to a halt.