



RESILIENCY AND SUSTAINABILITY: EIGHT ELEMENTS FOR SUPERINTENDENTS WHO WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE AND HAVE THE RESOLVE TO DO SO

BY MICHAEL FULLAN

The Oxford Thesaurus describes “resiliency” with these words: *elasticity, flexibility, life, spring, stretch, tenacity, rigor*. Why would anyone want to be all of these things? And what does it take to do so?

Enter the superintendent who wants to make a lasting difference.

Today’s superintendency calls on deep reserves from leaders who understand and seek to practice fundamental tenets of what I call “system thinkers in action.” Such leaders simultaneously understand the short term and the long term. They think systemically, and they act with practicality with the big picture in mind.

As the bedrock of their existence, leaders need to place their actions in the context of promoting greater sustainability. Sustainability has eight core elements, each carrying implications for those in the superintendency.

Eight Elements

The eight elements of sustainability constitute the agenda for the superintendent who wants to make a difference and has the resolve and energy to keep going.

- **Public Service with Moral Purpose.** Moral purpose always has been part of the teaching profession, but it has remained at the level of the individual teacher and principal who, against all odds, makes a difference in the lives of some students. It has remained, in other words, on a small scale.

The superintendent is in a position to make moral purpose a system quality. This means publicly fostering a commitment throughout the school district on:

- (1) raising the bar and closing the gap of student learning;
- (2) treating people with demanding respect (caring within a framework of high expectations); and
- (3) altering the social environment (making schools aware that all schools in the district must improve).

- **Commitment to Changing Context at All Levels.** Changing whole systems means changing the entire context within which people work. Researchers are fond of observing that “context is everything.” If context is everything, we must directly focus on how it can be changed for the better.

The sustaining superintendent is aware that he or she is engaged in what I call “trilevel development”—what has to happen at the school and community level, the districtwide level, and the system or state/federal policy level. Thus, superintendents must commit to pursuing public value through changing context. The idea is to give people new experiences, new capacities, and new insights into what should and can be accomplished. The eight elements in combination give people a taste of the power of new context.

- **Lateral Capacity Building Through Networks.** Centralization/decentralization is a perennial dilemma for those interested in large-scale reform. The two previous elements involve recalibrating the relationship between the central office and the schools. In the course of doing this, a powerful new strategy has been discovered. One of the most powerful means of fostering system or district identity is

to strengthen peer relations across schools.

Networked learning communities, clusters of schools working together, walkthroughs, and a host of other deliberate strategies are being established throughout districts that are on the move. Such purposeful interaction accomplishes two things: Quality knowledge is shared and sorted; and mutual commitment is generated. Mobilizing the minds and hearts of peers across the district is the key to deeper, lasting reform.

- **Intelligent Accountability and Vertical Relationships.** Sustainable school districts must constantly address (or hold in dynamic tension) the problem of how to ensure both local ownership on a large scale and external accountability. This complex problem is best addressed by strengthening the capacity of schools to engage in self review, but to do so transparently in

TEAM TIP

Although this article is written specifically for school superintendents, teams from organizations of all kinds can benefit from its principles. Each of the eight elements of sustainability can be adapted to other settings. For example, leadership development is key for organizations in every sector. As a group exercise, go through the eight elements and “translate” each item so that it applies more directly to your organization. Then evaluate what strategies and actions your enterprise could take in support of each of these tenets.

relation to district and state accountability frameworks.

Currently, No Child Left Behind gets this wrong, as it stresses only the accountability side of the equation and ignores almost all of the other elements of sustainability discussed here. By working on building up the capacity of all schools in the district in relation to the eight elements of sustainability, superintendents can become politically as well as educationally effective.

- **Deep Learning.** Sustainability, in my definition, requires continuous improvement, adaptation, and collective problem solving in the face of complex challenges that continually arise. Deep learning is essentially a matter of ambitious and important goals: Raise the bar and close the gap for all with respect to literacy and numeracy, emotional intelligence, thinking and problem solving, teamwork, and collaboration.

In these respects, assessment for learning has become a powerful tool. This means new capacities need to be developed throughout the system. Accessing student learning data on an ongoing basis, extracting meaning through disaggregated analysis, forming action plans, monitoring implementation, and making further improvements are all part of this new constellation of capacities that constitute a commitment to inquiry and deep learning.

- **Dual Commitment to Short-Term and Long-Term Results.** Like most aspects of sustainability, things that look as if they are mutually exclusive have to be brought together. On the one hand, the new reality is that systems have to show progress, let us say, within one election period, typically four years. Our knowledge base is such that no excuse exists for failing to design, implement, and get short-term results.

On the other hand, a focus only on short-term results can be at the expense of mid- or long-term development. Put most directly, systems should focus on tangible short-term results such as improved literacy

scores, but they must simultaneously work on establishing the eight elements of sustainability, because this is where long-term payoff resides. Over time, the system gets stronger, and fewer severe problems occur, as they are preempted by corrective action.

How does a committed superintendent hold it all together, stay the course, and maintain resiliency?

- **Cyclical Energizing.**

“Sustain” comes from the Latin word *sustineo*, which means “to keep up,” but this is misleading. Sustainability, paradoxically, is not linear. It is cyclical for two fundamental reasons. One has to do with energy, and the other wide, periodic plateaus, where additional time and ingenuity are required for the next breakthrough.

In their book *The Power of Full Engagement* (The Free Press, 2003), Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz presents four principles:

Principle 1: Full engagement requires four separate but related sources of energy: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

Principle 2: Because energy capacity diminishes both with overuse and underuse, we must balance energy expenditure with intermittent energy renewal.

Principle 3: To build capacity, we must push beyond our normal limits, training in the same systematic way that elite athletes do.

Principle 4: Positive energy rituals—highly specific routines for managing energy—are key to managing full engagement and sustained high performance.

- **The Long Lever of Leadership.**

Archimedes said, “Give me a lever long enough and I can change the world.” For sustainability, that lever is leadership. The main mark of a school superintendent at the end of his or her tenure is not just the impact on

the bottom line of student achievement, but equally how many good leaders he or she leaves behind who can go even further.

The superintendent’s longer-term impact is literally through other people. Developing other leaders in the district is absolutely critical.

Positive Bases

Leadership from superintendents must focus on the eight components of sustainability or else progress will not be made. How does a committed superintendent hold it all together, stay the course, and maintain resiliency?

In some political situations with divided and dysfunctional school boards, it will not be possible. One way of putting it is you might as well get fired for doing the right thing. More practically, doing the right thing by building system capacity is both morally justifiable and in most cases politically effective. Superintendents for sustainability create new positive power bases.

Many individual cases could be cited to illustrate the implication, but let’s take one further afield.

Knowsley Local Education Authority in England, a metropolitan authority just east of Liverpool, is defined as one of the most deprived areas in the country. It has considerably higher levels of social and economic disadvantage than the national average.

In 1999, Knowsley was assessed as being a seriously underperforming school district. A new superintendent, Steve Munby, was appointed in 1999, and the question facing him was: Can a low-performing, complex, and difficult urban district improve significantly within four short years?

A 2003 external assessment provides confirmation of substantial progress. Elementary school results rose at a faster rate than the national average, and retention rates increased by 12 percentage points. Recently, the superintendent led a complex and successful community involvement process across the whole district that resulted in an overwhelming endorsement of a plan to reduce the

11 secondary schools to eight with a renewed focus on districtwide secondary school innovation and reform.

Munby and his colleagues accomplished all of this essentially by following many of the principles outlined above. The drivers for change were low student performance, new leadership, external funding, and narrowing the gap between the highest and lowest performing schools.

The superintendent pointed to “common moral purpose and shared principles” and “a teaching and learning strategy establishing and sustaining the optimum mind state for learning and meeting the human mind’s need for novelty, challenge, meaning-making, and feedback in learning” (read, deep learning).

Munby’s priorities for sustainability include moral purpose; leadership in the big picture; training and support of lead learners; cluster-based networks of action learning; describing and sharing best practice; and support of further development embedding a culture of co-planning, co-teaching, and core view where everyone is a leader of learning.

Key Combination

Knowsley, of course, is not yet an example of sustainability, but one can see clearly that it is on the right track. The obvious question is what happens when a new superintendent comes in. The track record on leadership succession in the superintendency is abysmal. However, when it comes to sustainability, it is not turnover per se that is the problem but rather discontinuity of good direction. When superintendents work on the eight elements of sustainability, they greatly enhance (but do not guarantee) the conditions for future leadership selection that could provide not only continuity but also the deepening of good direction.

Resilience is perseverance plus flexibility, but you need a plan and a modus operandi. The big plan is sustainability, and what keeps sustainable superintendents going is the combination of moral purpose along with building leadership in others. That combination increases the capacity of the whole system to show progress as it establishes the conditions for going further.

Two simultaneous agendas are

at work. One is how individual superintendents can maintain resolve, energy, and effectiveness over time. We need more fine-grained examples of what strategies and habits enhance this possibility. The second and companion agenda is how we can improve systems so that structures and cultures are more supportive of superintendents.

No matter how you cut it, we need superintendents who are system thinkers in action. That is, they go about their work by simultaneously taking into account system forces while attempting to alter these very forces in order to transform the system itself. This is not only the route to greater accomplishments, but also may be the key to superintendent resiliency. ■

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