



A Focus on the Future: Education Improvement in Prince Edward Island

A Report to the Minister of Education

Michael Fullan and Mary Jean Gallagher

MFE Enterprises

March 31, 2016

Prince Edward Island may be a small province, but it is one with the potential for a big future as the Provincial Government moves forward with its plan for diversification of the economy. This will require the support of a strong and improving education system which can successfully prepare the island's youth to be academically strong, economically productive, caring and engaged citizens of their communities both local and global.

In many ways the next few years represent a wonderful opportunity for the province to get the systematic improvement of teaching and learning "right". Historically, the province's student achievement results have not been strong. This has resulted in considerable attention being paid to efforts to improve learning, with more specific provincial assessments being developed which will allow tracking of students over time, and commitments made to more targeted professional learning programs. This has yielded some very promising results from professional learning initiatives over the past few years, and has been accompanied by some worrying trends in some areas of student achievement as well.

PEI students participate in PISA, PCAP and Provincial Common Assessments, and there has been a strong focus to improve classroom assessment and instructional practices. PEI does not perform well in PISA and has a very high exclusion rate compared to the rest of Canada. In the PCAP assessments in reading, PEI's performance was among the lowest in the country in 2007. Across the PCAP administrations (2007, 2010 and 2013), PEI showed significant gains in reading moving the province to the middle of the nation. In mathematics, a poor 2010 result left the province again lowest in the country. Yet from PCAP 2010 to PCAP 2013, PEI saw significant gains and in fact, showed more than double the improvement of any other province repositioning PEI to the middle of the country.

For the past 10 years PEI has been implementing a program of provincial assessments in reading, writing and math, as recommended in the 2005 Task Force for Student Achievement. This is providing the province and schools with the rich data that will be required to enable the province to respond with more precision and success. In reading, strong overall improvement began in 2007, with a slight decline in grades 3 and 6 over the past two years and strong continued improvement evident in grade 9. In writing, there has been a significant decline in performance at grades 3 and 6. In mathematics the results are very promising, with remarkable improvement since 2012 and grades 6 and 9 showing consistent improvement that seems to be a direct result from the professional learning which has taken place. The ability to analyze trends over time, to examine and react to cohort data, and to track the numbers of students who are exempted from some of the assessments are crucial to the planning and implementation of a precise and successful improvement system. In addition, Provincial Common Assessment results provide a valid and reliable measure against which the education system can measure the success of programs and initiatives.

As we observe in the next several paragraphs, our own work focuses not only on strong progress in student learning and achievement, but also on what policies and strategies are most effective and high yield in obtaining success. In particular we are interested in the specific causal pathways for success in the short run, and sustainable success.

Thus, having the data necessary to evaluate and plan is one step in the process. But this will only leverage consistent gains in learning over time if the province can develop the ability to understand and use the information to refine instruction, and to focus clearly on this objective above all others at every level of the school system. With this in mind, the Minister requested the advice of Michael Fullan and Associates, asking for a review of the current status and recommendations to enable the province establish its priorities and plans to achieve the level of excellence PEI students deserve, staff are capable of delivering, and the province needs in order to build a more successful future. This review was intended as a quick 'stock take' given the timelines and commitment to action in the province.

## PROCESS

Our analysis of PEI's work to improve outcomes for its students began with an examination of available data regarding student achievement as well as major changes already made by the department of education and school districts over the past six years, followed by a two and half day visit and a series of meetings between Mary Jean Gallagher of MFE and a number of members of the Government of PEI, the Department of Education, as well as some staff from the two school districts on the island. Premier Wade MacLauchlan, Minister Doug Currie, Brian Douglas, Clerk of Executive Council and Secretary of Cabinet, in addition to Deputy Ministers Susan Willis of the Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture and Paul Ledwell of the Executive Council Office were particularly generous of their time and expertise, as well as that of various members of their district school board staff. Discussions were thorough and pointed as goals were clarified, strengths and challenges were identified and research on the implementation of successful improvement was shared.

## BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SUCCESS

Prince Edward Island's education system has a number of strengths in place that will serve it well as building blocks to improve student achievement.

1. There is a high degree of understanding and support for the value of education and the need for improvement of student achievement at the very highest levels of government. The Premier, the Minister of Education, and a number of other high profile members of Cabinet are aligned around this priority and knowledgeable about the work required to improve teaching and learning in Prince Edward Island's schools.
2. The province has recently committed to and announced a system of advisory bodies designed to increase the communication with and the engagement of local communities in the education system. The Learning Partners Advisory Council at the provincial level, 8 Family of Schools District Advisory Councils and the Principal Council which includes the principals of all 62 schools have the potential to increase community understanding of and partnership support with the school system across the province.
3. The Deputy Minister and the staff of the department are committed to the changes needed to effect improvement. The department has in place a number of staff who

understand government, and also those who understand education deeply. The recent planned merger of the staff of the English Language School District with the Department of Education will provide the opportunity to further strengthen the knowledge base with regard to professional learning resident within the department. There is a growing understanding in place regarding the need for the implementation of changes to be both top down and bottom up, for there to be a careful balance of pressure and support, and for changes to reach and engage staff in the school and the classroom in order to effect improved outcomes for students.

4. The District School boards (one English and one French) also have in place a number of supports for teacher learning and have placed a high priority upon building the capacity of front line staff to become more precise in their practice. Large numbers of PEI's teachers and principals voluntarily engage in professional learning in a wide range of initiatives designed to improve student learning, and clearly this is having an impact. The English school board has now been disbanded by the government so our recommendations relate to what would happen within the replacement system.
5. There is evidence of some very successful and promising practices that point the way to success. In particular, the improvements seen in mathematics at the intermediate level provide a stellar example of focussed, evidence based improvement practice which is successfully addressing the province's improvement goals. The nature of this professional learning, the deep and repeated engagement of large numbers of teachers, and the clear focus on formative assessment and those areas of the mathematics program in which students are experiencing the greatest difficulties are all hallmarks and models for success. This initiative, in fact, can provide the rest of Canada with some worthwhile lessons as many provinces strive to improve their mathematics achievement over time.
6. Considerable work with a significant proportion of schools has begun, led by the English language school district through its Progress Monitoring program. This would seem to be strengthening the assessment skills of teachers and building their capacity to be increasingly precise in diagnosing student need, although there is not yet conclusive evidence of the efficacy of the approach.
7. The province's approach to student assessment, using a balance of PISA and PCAP as well as the new Provincial Assessments and an emphasis on formative assessment by teachers positions the province well to have the data and evidence needed upon which to build and measure the efficacy of their improvement work. As the new secondary literacy assessment comes into place, this availability of reliable data over time will again strengthen the knowledge base.
8. In 2012/13 the department undertook a well researched review of Professional Learning in order to use professional learning as a change agent to build capacity with teachers. The resulting Professional Learning Report generated 7 key findings resulting in 10 recommended actions to support teacher professional learning and student achievement. The recommendations in the Professional Learning report align with what is known in research about effective professional learning, and point the way forward to improving teaching and learning in the province.

9. Size and geography can be a powerful advantage to Prince Edward Island and its desire to make significant instructional changes across its schools. The province is easily and relatively quickly traversed, and the number of schools is small when compared to elsewhere in our country (19691 students and 1563 educators, in 56 schools in the English Language School Board and 6 in the Commission Scolaire de Langue Francaise). It is possible to gather together the principals, full leadership teams or groups of teachers from all of the schools in the province without incurring the expense and time commitment of extensive travel.

## CURRENT CHALLENGES TO IMPROVING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

As in any education system world wide, Prince Edward Island is experiencing its own set of challenges that must be addressed if it is to move forward with urgency in improving student learning.

1. There have been a number of significant restructuring activities in the system over the past five years. Decentralization of the Department of Education (2010), an amalgamation of the two English Language School Boards into one (2013), internal restructuring of the Department of Education and Early Childhood (2013) to increase the focus on improving student achievement, and the recently announced dissolution of the English Language School Board and its integration with the Department of Education and Early Childhood (2015) with the creation of a Crown Corporation to oversee technical and operational responsibilities may all have been based upon good reasoning. However, the constant restructuring also has the impact of distracting staff all across the system away from a focus on student achievement. Structural changes per se do not lead to improvement. It is the capacity, culture, leadership and actions of schools and communities that do make the difference—we take up this matter in the recommendations section.
2. In 2014 the province announced a new technology initiative and has been working closely with IBM to align educational needs and infrastructure needs across the schools. All 62 schools will have wireless capability by the end of 2016. But over the past year the priority has been to complete the infrastructure upgrades, with the plan to embed technology into instruction and learning currently under development. Technology is not in itself a successful primary driver of improved student achievement, it can become a serious diversion of the resources and attention needed to provide the required professional learning to seamlessly integrate it into instruction. Given the province's increased emphasis on technology as a key component of its future economy, having the technology in place in schools is important, and technology can become an engaging support to new pedagogy and more effective teaching strategies. Care will need to be exercised to effectively use this technology as the catalyst for improvement that is its potential. Our own conclusions about technology are that pedagogy is the driver, not technology, and therefore focus should be placed on improved pedagogy and collaborative cultures therein. Pedagogy is the driver while technology is the accelerator and deepener, as we discuss below.

3. Schools in the province have experienced many of the changes and expectations for improvement over the past number of years as primarily a series of “top down” changes. This has resulted in uneven engagement across the province in the programs and priorities of the government and the school boards, and has left some staff in the system feeling overwhelmed. Principals, as the key instructional and change leaders in the schools, have raised concerns over their sense of a lack of adequate preparation for the new expectations of this role.
4. The province has in place many of the individual components of school improvement, but these are unevenly implemented and understood. In order for an entire school system to improve, a system of improvement activities must be in place and they must engage everyone in the system in a collaborative effort to improve. This becomes the path from a sense of overload and fragmentation to focus and coherence. As Michael Fullan writes, the right drivers for whole system reform are capacity building with a focus on results, collaboration, pedagogy, and systemness (coordinated policies). Creating a ubiquitous understanding of the importance of a whole system approach and how its various parts function together, at every level of the system, will be a significant challenge for the province. In our Coherence work (Fullan and Quinn, Corwin, 2016) we have offered a framework for this work. The most important thing to remember is that coherence is ‘fully and only’ *subjective*. This means that if coherence is not in the minds of people, it does not exist. Our definition of effective coherence is that it is “the shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work”. Strategies should be assessed in terms of their likely specific impact on subjective, shared understanding and its impact. Not an easy thing to accomplish.
5. At the secondary school level, students in Prince Edward Island’s schools perform well, but this is accompanied by an exemption rate (with respect to participation in province tests for students) that is unusually high. There is also a relatively large number of students from PEI who begin their university careers and leave by second year. While there are likely a number of factors, some social or environmental, involved in this phenomenon, it does raise questions about whether the expectations and standards of performance expected of the province’s graduates are as strong as those in some other parts of our country.
6. Prince Edward Island is small, and 54% of its population is rural with the rest living in two cities and 8 towns. For decades the island’s geography created a sense of isolation and protection from the mainland. Prince Edward Island has had a long history of a successful economy, based to a large extent on the agricultural and fisheries sectors. Both of these sectors are becoming increasingly complex, demanding additional training and skilled use of new technologies in order to drive increasing yield while maintaining and increasing the resource stocks and land available. This is creating a demand for high quality education that members of the community may not yet fully recognize and appreciate. Research by John Hattie identifies a student’s aspirations for what they can accomplish as one of the primary influences on their successful academic trajectory, and students gain high aspirations from the encouragement and support of the significant adults in their lives, their parents, family members and teachers. Creating a culture of high achievement and learning in PEI’s schools will need to involve community work as

well, ensuring the island's citizens and educators can work together to raise expectations and value the results.

7. Investing in capacity building for staff takes resources and requires political courage. Allocating finances, time, leadership and developing new information regarding high quality assessment and pedagogical strategies, as well as providing opportunities for teachers and principals to collaborate in implementing these changes into their daily practice takes ongoing and consistent advocacy and support. Like many other jurisdictions, the government of PEI is in fact experiencing significant constraints on their budget. The difficult work of reprioritizing existing resources will need to take place. PEI has many small and undersubscribed schools that should be considered for amalgamation. Resources currently being spent on these buildings, and often very small classes as there are not enough students to fill them, could be used far more effectively to leverage better learning for all of the island's youth. As the merger of the department and the English Language School Board proceeds, resources and priorities for all professional learning programs will have to be re-examined. And given the constraints of size, PEI struggles to develop the research and materials to support the needed changes in teaching approaches.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

Prince Edward Island has a number of strong building blocks in place to fuel improvement in teaching and learning in its schools. Its most important resource is people, and concerned caring leaders, educators and citizens willing to work together on the changes needed can be found in abundance. The province is now at a crossroads, ready to realize its great potential to extend some of its current improvements and most importantly to commit to whole system improvement, bringing together the right conditions and priorities to give Prince Edward Island and all of its children the bright future they deserve. The time to act, with purpose, support and careful planning is now. Building on the changes already in place, with the right actions and a sense of urgency, PEI could in fact become Canada's next example of sustainable and measurable improvement in teaching and learning.

In order to realize these gains, we recommend Prince Edward Island over the next five years pursue the following actions:

- 1. Commit to the focused pursuit of improvement in a small number of goal areas:**
  - a. The pursuit of significant and measurable improvement in reading, writing and mathematics K-12.**
  - b. Raising expectations and aspirations of student performance in secondary schools while at the same time building in the supports students need in order to achieve these higher goals.**
  - c. Narrowing the achievement gaps which currently exist for some students and schools.**

The work begun in raising reading levels and improving mathematics performance should be extended and sustained to ensure that the investments and progress to date does not dissipate.

In the first few years, the emphasis on literacy in the early years and primary levels is important, every teacher needs to develop skill and precision in assessing student progress in learning to read, in diagnosing student challenges and the next stages of learning and in observing the impact of their teaching. At the primary and intermediate levels, considerable effort should be prioritized in writing, as this would appear to be the most significant gap in performance at this point in time. And in the intermediate levels, the current emphasis and approach to the improvement of mathematics should be extended and expanded.

At the secondary school level, comparative research should be undertaken (tightly controlled in terms of content and timelines in order to ensure productive results) examining the curriculum and standards of performance in place in PEI's schools as compared to those in other more successful jurisdictions in Canada, most notably those in Alberta and Ontario. At the same time, research and evidence could be gathered into effective practices to assist students in meeting these expectations, with an emphasis on individualized supports for students (such programs as the presence of caring adults for each student, the development of a broad range of opportunities for authentic learning experiences which are both school and community based, or options for dual credit achievement for at risk students). These research projects could be undertaken in partnership with the University of Prince Edward Island, providing staff and students in the faculty of education with opportunities for relevant research projects.

In closing the gap, the Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture should develop a pilot program to work with PEI's five or six lowest achieving schools, providing direct partnership and support to the staff of these schools in their improvement planning, implementation activities and professional learning.

**2. That political, department and system leaders work to raise awareness and dialogue about the importance of high quality education to Prince Edward Island's future and that of its youth, seeking to develop additional community understanding and partnerships in support of student learning.**

This work speaks to the voice and presence of PEI's leaders in highlighting education as part of the public dialog. It also allows the system to capitalize on the creation of the various advisory bodies to ensure they can make a meaningful contribution to the improvement efforts. As the work of these advisory bodies is developed, it will be important that the Provincial Learning Partners Advisory Council and the 8 Family of Schools District Advisory Councils have an advisory capacity with impact, that their work makes a difference for student learning, but that they not become enmeshed in technical or academic operations and become a distraction from the priorities for improvement.



**3. The key to successful large-scale change involves a strong sense of partnership between the government and the schools, and the mobilization of schools working collaboratively internally and across schools (what we call leadership from the middle). The idea in PEI would be to develop a combination of a strong sense of urgency (now is the time to do this) with a corresponding commitment to ‘making change happen’ together. The quality of this partnership has to be proven in action.**

**Thus, PEI should draw together the various components of its improvement efforts and build a more systematic approach in which information, ownership and leadership of change flows both top down and bottom up, and in which partners in the education system see themselves as collaborating for the good of the students of the province.**

The cornerstones of this work involve: a) building a sense of coherence throughout the system as whole system reform is undertaken, b) building a focus on the critical role of principals as “leaders from the middle”, becoming the glue that holds the system of improvement together among the school and provincial levels, and c) putting in place the systematic processes required to deliver upon these intentions of giving leadership, voice and ownership to educators.

The Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture should meet immediately with representatives of the Principals’ Council to articulate the goal of deep collaboration in the development of professional learning to build principals’ and department members skills as instructional leaders and coherence makers. The two groups should then co-design a multi year program of integrated learning for these key educational leaders in both schools and the department. This work should begin this spring if possible, with the goal of a meeting of all principals and department instructional leads in which the building blocks of change implementation, coherence and collaboration could be better understood before the school year ends, allowing principals to incorporate some of their new understanding into their planning for the following school year.

Prince Edward Island should also coordinate, repurpose and reinvigorate their school and system improvement planning processes (collaborative development of these processes among department members, principals and teacher representatives would be a good approach). Every school, over time, should be expected to engage staff in an annual improvement planning process, examining data and evidence about their school and student performance, comparing their school to the known factors and indicators of school effectiveness, setting SMART (strategic, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely) goals for improved student learning for the following year, identifying high leverage teaching strategies which the staff commit to using and for which they will hold each other internally accountable, and planning for monitoring and refinement of the impact and approaches throughout the year. The Department should do likewise in planning for instructional improvement priorities, and over several years these two planning processes should inform each other – schools incorporate department goals

into their thinking, the department incorporates school goals into their priority setting, and collaboration between the two groups becomes more and more effective.

**4. That the Government of Prince Edward Island work to remove current distractions from addressing the student achievement agenda.**

At the present time this involves addressing three priorities: a) complete the restructuring work of amalgamating the department and the English Language School Board, announcing the administrative structures and completing the hiring and placement processes as soon as possible; b) attempt to resolve outstanding labour issues and achieve a multi year collective agreement with the teachers' union so that the work of engaging teachers and their union in improvement work can proceed more smoothly, and c) clarify the role, responsibilities and functioning of the various newly created advisory committees so that their energy and leadership can contribute to the overall improvement planning process.

**5. That priority be placed in capacity building activities for educators on professional learning opportunities and programs which are aligned with the system goal and improvement planning activities as well as recent research regarding the principles of effective professional learning.**

This will require the department to re-examine all of the current resources and plans dedicated to educator professional learning and to re-prioritize them. In a systematic approach, professional learning priorities are established in response to student learning needs and the goals for improvement set by the government and the schools. Programs are delivered in a combination of more traditional PD sessions to provide new information about effective approaches, a series of professional learning communities at the school level or between and among schools with a particular focus and with the necessary school based supports to enable educators to make the changes in their practice required.

In examining priorities for educator capacity building, specific teaching strategies successfully used at various grade levels to differentiate instruction and assist teachers in meeting the needs of diverse groups of students must be included in order to address the current concerns regarding the levels of inclusion in PEI's classrooms. This would seem to be a particularly urgent need as students enter secondary school, and may contribute to the solution of the challenges of standards and expectations raised earlier in this document. Another area which will also need to be carefully incorporated is that of leveraging the recent investment in technology as a support to the changes required to accomplish the new overarching goals and priorities set.

Clearly the recommended changes within this report will only be achieved over several years, the prioritization and planning process undertaken by the department should include the priorities over the next few years, but should remain flexible in the

subsequent years so that it can be refined in response to the planning processes at the school level.

**6. That the government examine ways in which the resources required for systematic improvement of teaching and learning can be provided.**

Over the past few decades much has been learned about how children and young people learn, how the human brain works, and what teaching approaches might best capitalize on this new information. Yet actually seeing teachers implementing changes in their practice is a challenging pursuit. It will not happen without resources and support, and these are in short supply given current fiscal constraints. In addition, protecting the resources required for teacher learning in order to improve student learning is not an easy political choice, its impact is only visible over time in student performance and it is easy to assign credit or blame for changes in this area to a number of factors. But any government has a clear choice in this regard. All provincial governments in Canada spend a considerable amount of money on their education systems K-12, and we have a strong system in response to this investment. However, recent improvement work in a number of jurisdictions suggest that a relatively small protected investment in capacity building so that the educators in the system might work together to improve instruction can in fact provide the catalyst needed for real and sustainable improvement in learning by our students. Within this context, governments need to carefully examine how they allocate resources, what they can expect in return (accountability for results) and how best provide the balance of pressure and support that will move the system forward.

School amalgamations and the savings resulting from these and other changes over time should be considered part of the solution, as does the need to re-evaluate any other activity being undertaken and resourced. Staff who have been preserved in the schools even as enrolment declines (as announced this past year) might also be able to be used in support of the local school or schools' improvement planning and collaboration. And principals and staffs, over time, will need opportunities to share their solutions to alternative school arrangements which might provide professional learning community meeting time for teachers with fewer interruptions to the student day and learning.

Every program for professional learning should be reconsidered for integration, but we might add a note of caution with respect to doing this prematurely with respect to the Progress Monitoring program of the former English Language School Board. This is a large commitment in a program that appears to move in the right direction, certainly helping teachers become more precise in assessing student learning and need. The implementation design however has meant that the advantages of having this additional knowledge do not become clear to teachers until at least the second year of implementation, giving rise to concerns expressed that it is accompanied by a heavy workload which does not on the surface appear to benefit students. Implementation may also have suffered because of a potential lack of coherence in its support as a result of the portfolio designs of the various school board administrative team members.

Before any decision is made on the long-term value of this program, the department may want to consider a slower expansion in the new school year, to provide time for a more thorough and differentiated (year by year) examination of its impact on teacher skill and practice as well as student achievement. There may well be components of the design of this program which will serve future goals of the system well

## CONCLUSION

All of this is designed to serve the need to have a coherent system (read, ‘a shared depth of understanding’) focussed on improved teaching and learning in the island’s schools. PEI’s students need it, its schools need it, and the future strength of the province depends upon it. As articulated in the book *Coherence* (Fullan and Quinn, 2016), in order to have improved outcomes in a sustainable way over time across the system, leaders at all levels must find the right combination of focusing direction, cultivating collaboration, deepening learning and securing internal and external accountability. And provincial leaders must use the pursuit of coherence in their own actions, but also create the infrastructure of policy, budget, and partnerships at the middle and local levels for “whole system improvement” to flourish. The next year to two will be crucial for PEI to establish the trust and ownership, indeed the action, that leads to collective efficacy, and that this time ‘we will make change happen together’.

We believe the recommendations in this report will enable Prince Edward Island to make the next and continuing steps to a new and brighter future for its students and schools.