During the late 1990s, how was Britain able to balance both a large-scale education reform and a new accountability system?

We had a policy in 1997-2001 to combine pressure and support. The sound bite we used was, “Britain had twenty years of support without pressure, ten years of pressure and no support, and now we will have both.” On the pressure side, we had a strong accountability system through publicly-reported annual tests of 7, 11, 14, and 16-year olds, and a school inspection system where schools were inspected on a four-year cycle. On the support side, there was a major investment in funding to improve school budgets and there was an investment in what Michael Fullan would call “collective capacity,” building capacity through a professional development program across the whole system, based on international best practice. It was a large-scale, whole-system reform tailored toward schools with the biggest challenges. Where schools on the accountability system were seen as failing, there was a requirement on the local authorities to turn them around or close them and reopen them to give them a fresh start. As a result, there was a huge improvement in numeracy in primary schools, a general improvement in school systems. In 2001, England was third in the world in literacy, was the most improved in the world in mathematics on the primary level according to the TIMSS results from 1995 to 2007, and the early PISA results also showed that. That was our first coherent attempt at large-scale school reform.

In my report, “How the World’s Most Improved Systems Keep Getting Better,” the usual trigger for such system-wide reform is either a change in leadership, a report, a major crisis, or a combination of these. And, what we had in 1997 was a massive change in leadership. The Labour party was elected for the first time in 18 years. Blair made a commitment to the opposition that education, education, and education were his top three priorities. While Blair was in opposition, a small group of us designed the policy, really thought through strategically, planned the implementation, and I charted a report on how we would do
the literacy strategy, which we adapted and tailored to include numeracy. We did a lot of planning in advance. We had a great secretary of education, David Blunkett, and the team that had done the planning came and took over and drove this. We exploited the opportunity we had with Blair’s huge political capital to generate the momentum.

You address in “Three Paradigms of Public-Sector Reforms” the common pitfalls that can impede reform. How can educational change leaders avoid these pitfalls?

First, be aware of common pitfalls. The more people engage in large-scale education research, and the more that body of work is read and understood by change leaders, the better chance they have of avoiding the pitfalls. While straightforward, it is surprising how difficult it is to get that done. Second, political courage. A lot of reforms fail because people compromise too early on what their body of evidence says they should do; they make compromises or conform. Third, good planning makes a difference. What I am doing now in the U.S. is to help states plan and implement. Getting the policy right is critical, but that is only 10% of the challenge; getting the implementation right is 90% of the challenge. It is absolutely fundamental to build a system that tells you what is going well and what is not going well quickly and then adjust.

I have recently set up a non-profit, the U.S. Delivery Institute, that is advising a number of states on how to do the implementation of their Race to the Top proposals and statewide strategies. It is helping them to apply the knowledge of whole-system reform and implementation and to design systems where they can identify early things that are going wrong and therefore, avoid the pitfalls.

What are the top three lessons education reformers can draw from your work on how to improve systems?

The lessons from the first report, “How the World’s Best Performing Systems Come Out on Top,” are to design processes to recruit great people into teaching and to build strategies for improving the teaching profession, strategy for professional development and for building collective capacity. The lessons from the second report, “How the World’s Most Improved Systems Keep Getting Better,” are to take account on where you are on the spectrum. We divided the examined countries into four sections—poor to fair, fair to good, good to great, and great to excellent—and asked how are systems at each of these stages improving, how are they making their journeys to excellence. If you are in Brazil, there is no point in trying to adopt the policies of Singapore because Singapore is already a great system and is becoming excellent. What you can do is learn about Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s and the mix of policies that worked at different levels.

I am currently working in Punjab. They have very low-capacity teachers. What they need is well-scripted guides. “Here are 150 lesson plans for the next school year. If you follow that lesson plan, your children will make progress, and we are going to check.” That is the kind of model for a very basic system. Then, over time, you need to focus on building capacity in the teaching profession, developing their skills. The balance of accountability and capacity-building changes over time.

In Punjab, there is strong accountability and strong capacity building, a split of about 50-50, but when you get to Singapore, Finland, or Ontario, the split needs to be 75% capacity building and 25% accountability. You still need accountability, but you do not need to emphasize it because as teachers become more sophisticated professionals, they need less driving from
the center and more collective capacity building and peer pressure.

Right now, there is a huge opportunity to make progress to the U.S. education system. There are many favorable factors lined up that might not easily come again—the best leadership ever with Arne Duncan and the U.S. Department of Education, backing from the President, a good agenda, and more funding available to be strategic and thoughtful and to be very influential. Secondly, there are significant numbers of large-scale experiments around the country. There is backing for that constructive agenda from foundations and a variety of non-profits. There are remarkable opportunities to make big progress. The stars are lined up now. However, the U.S. has many challenges.

First, the way U.S. governs education with 50 states, 15,000 school districts, some 100,000 schools, and a relatively weak federal level makes the whole system of reform a big challenge. The real system-level is the state level. And there you have two challenges—the relationships between the states and districts is variable and not very strong, and the state bureaucracy is relatively weak; it is a regulatory and bureaucratic organization.

The second problem is building capacity of the states to lead whole-system reforms. The Race to the Top initiative is encouraging states to be the leaders of whole-system reform, and you see states around the country struggling with that transition, which my organization is explicitly designed to do—to help them transition.

The third challenge is to make teaching as attractive as possible to future generations of Americans, both emerging from university and those that have graduated five or ten years ago and could go into teaching with right encouragement. If you come from the data angle, there are still huge variations in the performances of the systems; you have one of only four systems in the world where wealthy areas fund their schools better than poorer areas. You still have large pockets of underperformance in education that are worrisome. However, I am optimistic about the U.S. system and it’s ability to make progress over the next five years.

How do we professionalize whole system reform within the education sector?

I see this happening as we speak. Professionalization to me means that there is a group of people with a body of knowledge they can apply, and they have a set of ethics and values that go with that. That is what defines a profession and professionalization. Over the last 10-15 years, knowledge base on how to reform whole systems has grown significantly. In the 1980s, there was a lot of research on school effectiveness in America, Australia, Netherlands. By the end of 1980s, it was clear what an effective school was, what characteristics it had, and they were all broadly consistent with each other.

And then, people started saying, “that’s interesting, but what we really want to know is how to improve schools.” So, in the 1990s, we focused on school improvement and began to apply that knowledge in Australia, Canada, the UK, Netherlands, and the U.S.

Then, in 2000s, we said, “improving schools is fine, but how do we reform the entire system? Could we begin to identify systems of effectiveness?” The combination of TIMSS and PISA began to line up with the evidence base, and there was enough evidence to say, “what do the effective systems look like?” We are beginning to get a clear picture of what great systems look like. And now, we are doing what we did with schools, we are answering the questions
about how to improve systems. There is a group of people now around the world looking at this data, identifying the knowledge, and the people in positions are beginning to acquire that knowledge systematically. There is a constant dialogue among leaders about how to apply that knowledge. If you look at the Minister of Education for Singapore and his people, they are constantly flying out of the country, trying to learn about what is going on elsewhere in other systems. That is what professionalization means, the knowledge is getting stronger and more people are trying to learn that knowledge. We are at the beginning and are going to see great progress. We wanted to do evidence-based policy, and now, it is happening.

*What do you see as one of or the most pressing issue related to educational change today?*

The most pressing issue in the developing world is to worry about not just whether children are getting to school but also making sure that they learn something once they get there. If we do not do that, we are creating inequality and potentially, destabilization in 20-30 years. Pakistan has 187 million people now, and they are going to have 340 million people by 2040-2050. They have a large young population and hundreds of thousands of children leaving school with no skills or not even having been to school and no prospect of getting a job. That is where inequality affects global geopolitics.

The biggest challenge in education reform is to take this body of knowledge, adopt it and apply it to the places like Pakistan, Nigeria, poor parts of India, and to significant parts of Africa, particularly in mega cities of more than 10 million. Karachi (Pakistan), for example, has around five million children in the city. Half a million of them are in government schools, another million in private schools, and then, a bunch of children not accounted for. These types of cities are vulnerable to violence and frustration.

**SIR MICHAEL BARBER**

Sir Michael Barber is Chief Education Advisor for Pearson and the founder of the U.S. Education Delivery Institute. He is the leading authority on education systems and education reform. Prior to his current post, he was a partner at McKinsey & Company, where he led global education practice. He was also the Head of the UK Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit (2001-2005) and a Chief Advisor to the Secretary of State for Education on School Standards (1997-2001). His recent publications include: *Deliverology 101* (Corwin, 2011), *How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better* (McKinsey & Company, 2010), *How the World’s Best-Performing Schools Come Out on Top* (McKinsey & Company, 2007), *Instruction to Deliver* (Politicos Publishing, 2007), and *The Learning Game: Arguments for an Education Revolution* (Gollancz, 1997). He can be reached at michael.barber@pearson.com.