

Leadership for system change in education: You have to be there

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A radical and new approach to school and system transformation is essential. In this article I first describe the need for and nature of the transformation. Second, I provide some specific case examples of the change in action. Finally, I draw conclusions about the new kind of leadership required for the next phase—2026 and beyond. I have tried to write this article so that it would connect with a variety of leadership for change roles. As a leader if you cannot find yourself anywhere in this article, I will have failed. If you find yourself everywhere, I will have failed equally. I believe this new work is focused, comprehensive and deep.

The crying need for transformative change

For the 6th edition of *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (Fullan, 2025), I examined in close detail the question of progress in learning over a 60-year period from 1965 to 2025. I was interested in overall success including PISA-type measures of student achievement. I took as my reference point whole countries, provinces, states, and school regions containing multiple schools, districts, and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) across the world, with the possible exception of Singapore which is small (barely more than 300 schools). I found no overall success including from the year 2000 when PISA began its assessment of literacy, numeracy, and science.

After reviewing 60 years of attempts at system change, I concluded that schools have lost their sense of purpose. Harvard Professor, Richard Elmore, a stalwart of hands-on system change at the school and district levels, in a podcast interview in January 2021, just before his death had concluded: “schools have become obsolete. People are not going to stand for it. They are just going to walk away.” Indeed, increasing numbers of students and teachers have and are departing mentally and/or physically.

Since about 2014, I began to work on alternatives. Many of us were primarily interested in public or state schools, although we also linked with independent schools, especially those committed to the public domain. In this brief article my goal is to capture recent developments, especially with respect to leadership, in the past five years that evidence new success which increasingly (2025 onward) offers a potential new era for public and private schools. I draw only on examples of actual success with large numbers of schools.

My intent is to capture the nature of this trend toward what I call “systemness.” Systemness is when a whole entity—a set of schools, districts, regions, provinces, states—commits to accomplishing system-wide measurable success. (Several examples from Australia, Canada, and the United States are presented later in this article). Systemness is the conscious sense that participants (students, parents, educators) are proactive members of large group of people striving to accomplish measurable, impactful new learning (Fullan, 2023). As we say, “systemic is something you study,” “systemness is something you own.”

In the work we have done we have turned the system on its head (so to speak), by advocating that instead of thinking of the flow of action in terms of three levels flowing downward, i.e., Top (policy), Middle (region), Bottom (local), we have reversed the conception as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: System Change: A New Approach



From *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (6th ed., p. 84) by M. Fullan, 2025, Teachers College Press. Reprinted with permission.

There is interaction across levels all the way through, but the centre of gravity is to consciously “build the base” in order to develop the local “system” for students, educators, parents, and the community in relation to new priorities. First examples of this were provided in Fullan (2023), *The Principal 2.0*. If the local entity (i.e., the district or regional entity) is part and parcel of the individual school initiatives,

then the primary driver of system change becomes the first two levels. As we will see in the next section, a key driver of system change consists of *lateral learning* which occurs within schools, across schools, across districts or local authorities.

“Intrigue the top” is deliberately playful as an opening gambit. We are already sensing interest from the top as schools and middle level entities develop and push upwards; and in the next section of this article, one such system example that focuses on South Australia is provided. It is argued that changing all three levels in concert will be required eventually to achieve system change.

New transformative change in action

South Australia

I start with the case of one whole state in Australia - South Australia. South Australia is one of eight entities (six states and two territories) in Australia. It is a smallish state with a population of 1.8 million, with almost 800 schools, most of which are in the greater capital region of Adelaide (constituting 80% of the population). The rest of the schools are small and spread across small rural towns and “country areas” with large distances between communities. There are 16 Aboriginal schools. The Government of South Australia spent the past two years consulting widely and often about its plan to revamp the entire system captured in the document, *Our Strategy for Public Education in South Australia* (Government of South Australia, 2024). The result is a 28 page document with explicit emphasis on wellbeing, equity and excellence, learner agency, and effective learners.

There is an explicit emphasis on global competencies such as curiosity, creativity, meaning making, strategic awareness, meta-cognition and self-regulation; as well as “voice to agency,” and partners in learning. There is also a focus on “effective teaching,” “empowered leadership,” and a commitment to strengthening supports including resourcing and investment. The document has five guiding change principles and these include collective responsibility, learning system, evaluate for impact, tight and flexible monitoring, and a trust and verify relationship in carrying out the work. Monitoring measures include a “sense of belonging, resilience, attendance, and engagement, as well as foundations in subject areas” (Government of South Australia, 2024, p. 8).

There are frequent “forums” of discussion with staff and communities across the state. The system is overseen at the top by the Minister of Education, and led by the Chief Executive, Martin Westwell, CEO of the Department of Education who manages the system on a day-by-day basis. In a recent Podcast, Westwell describes how joint determination, school level support, and student agency are used to shape local implementation (Westwell, 2025)

Professor Pasi Sahlberg based at the University of Melbourne serves as an ongoing consultant to the Government plan that has an explicit emphasis on our (the Fullan) “systems model.” In early 2025, I participated twice in discussions around the implementation of the government plan and in each case it involved half of the school leaders and teachers. In these discussions, state and local educators interact within and across school communities to strengthen and implement the core model and its principles.

Focused interaction, monitoring progress, celebrating results, and addressing problems are normal fare to the systems model which is becoming ensconced in the entire system. Overall, the strategy has all the ingredients of system transformation and progress. Systematic impact data over the next two years will be needed to confirm that improvement strategies have taken hold and are yielding results.

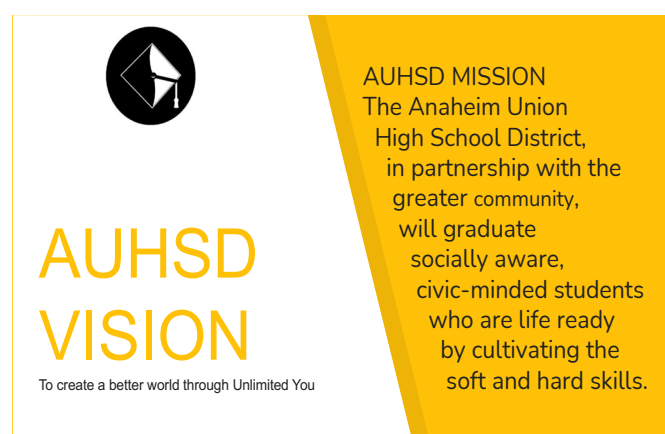
Having documented 60 years of system failure, I should know that promising new directions do not count as success. The Minister and/or the CEO could depart in the next year. Yet there is a glimmer that it may be worthwhile to attempt thorough reforms such as the South Australian case with its two-way interaction with implementers. This glimmer involves investment in lasting capacities and commitment at the local and middle levels that become established enough to carry on. New dynamics could occur where more entities join in. Anytime the bottom and middle grow, such capacity plants the seeds for further developments. It is worth pushing the limits. It is important to note that this case does represent an attempt in real time to cause positive system-wide transformation and build on it. There is widespread agreement and support at the regional levels and strong support at the centre. The short-term goal over the next two years is to build on and deepen systemness in South Australia. The next example refers to a bigger and thornier locale - California.

Systemness in California

We have been working for the past five years with school districts in California. We have two teams: One that I lead that works intensely with districts like Anaheim Union High School District (AUHSD); and the other is a research team (Fine, Rincon-Gallardo, and me) that is conducting research on a promising new development across six different school districts in the state - one of which is AUHSD.

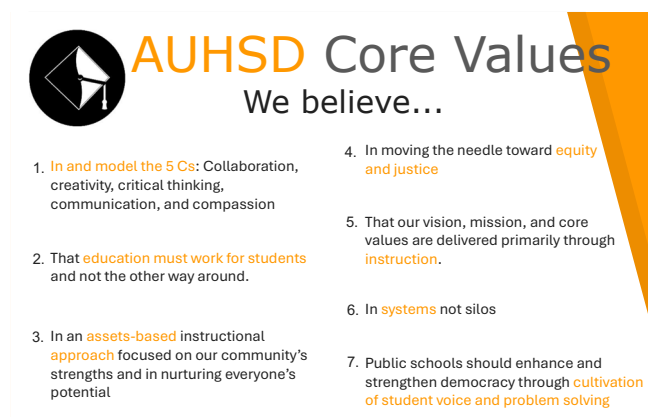
There are about 1,000 districts in the state with at least 350 of them having fewer than 5,000 students. One of these districts we have intense work with is AUHSD which is in the city of Anaheim in Los Angeles County. It is a high-poverty district with a diverse ethnic composition made up of Hispanics, Blacks, Vietnamese, Whites, and others. There are 26 schools and some 20,000 students. The schools are from Years 7-12 with students aged from 12-18 years. Our team is conducting developmental support for the district including ongoing case studies of the districts’ progress (see Berry et al., in press; Brazer & Matsuda, 2023; Fullan & Quinn, 2024). The AUHSD’s vision and core values are captured in the following two diagrams.

Figure 2: AUHSD Vision and Mission



From *Anaheim Union High School District Vision*, by Anaheim Union HSD, January 31, 2025. Strategic Plan. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 3: AUHSD Core Values



From *Anaheim Union High School District Core Values*, by Anaheim Union HSD, January 31, 2025. Strategic Plan. <https://www.auhsd.us>. Reprinted with permission.

AUHSD pursues these values and goals through a “Career Preparedness Systems Framework” (CPSF) (Anaheim Union HSD, 2025) that includes student voice and purpose and five 21st Century skills (character and compassion, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking). AUHSD collapsed our six C’s into five (as can be seen in Figure 3; see also Brazer & Matsuda, 2023). We continue to track and help with AUHSD’s development including its deep transformation. We are funded by The Stuart Foundation which is a non-profit foundation committed to the transformation of learning and wellbeing for secondary school students aged between 12 to 18. In late 2024 the Foundation told us:

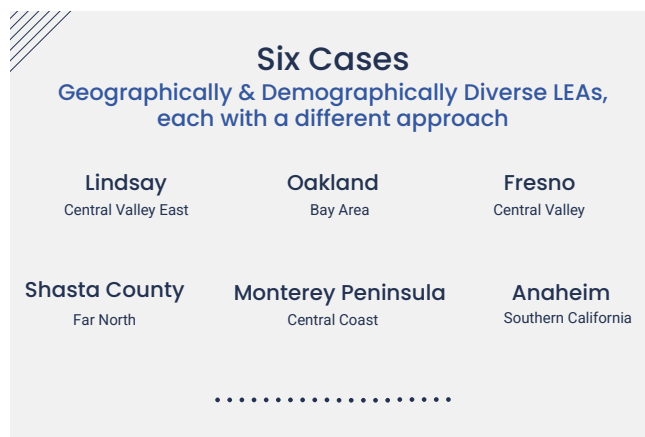
We like the AUHSD case study, but it is only one district. Could you seek and study other secondary school districts in the state that are showing similar development, namely variations on the theme of success with secondary school students? (personal communication)

Our team consists of Sarah Fine (an Assistant Professor at University of San Diego), Santiago Rincon-Gallardo a researcher who works with me in Toronto, and is an independent researcher, and me. We spent this last year identifying and studying a total of six districts including Anaheim. Our report (Fine, Rincon-Gallardo & Fullan, 2025) which we draw on here will appear as a book in mid-year 2026.

The context is decidedly negative; that is, teenagers in California like almost everywhere else in the globe are struggling. As we say in our report, “teenagers are not all right.” They are suffering from low engagement, low achievement, and a lack of wellness. School systems (especially secondary schools) are notoriously hard to change (Fine et al., in press). In California, for example, there are various institutional constraints, loosely coupled systems, traditional instruction, and cultural resistance characterised by discouraged cultures where nothing seems to work.

My argument in this article is that we have not looked closely enough at the struggling successes. We have gone about system change the wrong way. We have tried to incentivise change from the top. We have not looked for potentially successful cases, and leveraged them for system insights. The six cases we found are intended to highlight what school systems can do to foster success through initiatives of their own. The districts we studied are geographically and demographically diverse (see Figure 4)

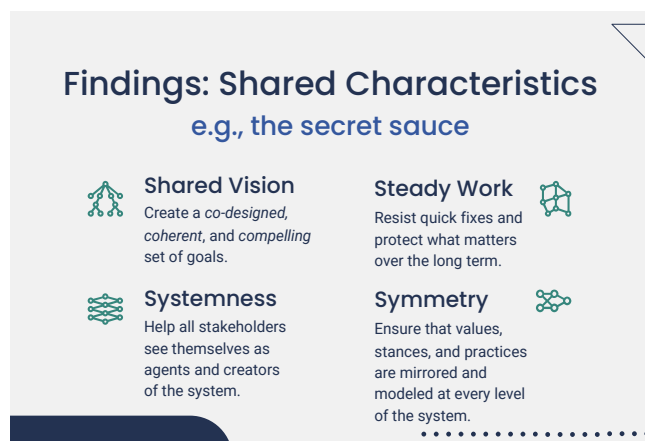
Figure 4: Six cases



From *System-Wide Supports for Adolescent Learning and Well-Being: Evidence from Six California LEAs* (p. 3), by S. Fine, S. Rincon-Gallardo and M. Fullan, 2025, Stuart Foundation. Reprinted with permission.

Each of the schools had arrived at a different approach but identified and developed similar core themes (See Figure 5). At the end of the day, we were able to identify common elements that fed on, reinforced, and fostered evolving progress. This system phenomenon fits my definition of “simplicity” (Fullan, 2025) understood as the smallest number of key factors which, *when they interact*, cause and reinforce a new system direction; a new system coherence.

Figure 5: Findings: Shared Characteristics Across Six Cases



From *System-Wide Supports for Adolescent Learning and Well-Being: Evidence from Six California LEAs* (p. 3), by S. Fine, S. Rincon-Gallardo and M. Fullan, 2025, Stuart Foundation. Reprinted with permission.

What is ironic is that we have known about these shared characteristics for decades. One way or the other we can find them in research and good practice. But they are typically not extracted and put into practice on any sustained basis; and thus, even when started do not stick. The broader system has never been able to facilitate such examples into a movement. They remain as largely unknown ad hoc examples. They don’t come in the form of neat strategic plans, but seem to muddle through as they discover, maintain, and even connect promising lines of development.

I contend in this article that more of these types of breakthroughs will come from shifting our stance to cultivating, identifying, extracting, and spreading bottom, and middle “up and out” ideas and practices that meet the new needs of the 21st century.

Unyoking the system

We should start by “unyoking” the system from the old game—the so-called grammar of schooling with its obsession on test scores that is some 200 years old.

Figure 6: Unyoking the System



From *System-Wide Supports for Adolescent Learning and Well-Being: Evidence from Six California LEAs* (p. 8), by S. Fine, S. Rincón-Gallardo and M. Fullan, 2025, Stuart Foundation. Reprinted with permission.

It is finally time to break with our past which at best expected slow, ad hoc “sprouts,” and replace this with a sustained effort at cultivating and spreading many examples of system success at the middle level and beyond. We think that now, 2026-2030, is the most propitious time we have ever had to tackle the reality of transforming the system. There was a time in the first decade of this century when I thought we had the opportunity and knowledge to accomplish new system change that would benefit the most people. I wrote an article in 2020 called “The return of large-scale reform.” In 2003 in Ontario, we launched a system-wide reform with our 72 districts (4,000 schools, 900 secondary schools). We made great progress in improving literacy, numeracy (less so), and especially high school graduation.

Alas in the *New Meaning of Educational Change* (2025, 6th ed.) I concluded that 2008-2018 was the “while we were asleep” decade. Progress stalled (indeed reversed), economic inequality between the richest and the poor and middle classes galloped ahead almost unnoticed, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) made massive gains unbeknownst to the public (only realised when ChatGPT came roaring on the scene on November 30, 2022).

I now believe—hence this article—that we have a new opportunity to pick up differently in 2025 what we failed to do in 2008, and repeatedly all of this century. (Did you know that PISA scores have declined ever since they were first assessed in 2000? PISA assessments occur tri-annually since literacy and math were first measured in 2000. The good news is that they are the wrong measures anyway).

Prospects for real system reform

There are good and bad times to fail at system change. Now (2025) is one of those propitious times to assess and build on what we know. Promising breakthroughs await because elements of success abound. There are thousands of change stories and interests out there so I can’t provide evolved customised solutions of system change. But I can

say that this is one of the best (and most crucial) times to throw your efforts into actual change. It is better than 2003 because since then we know more and have an edge of frustration with elements of pressing hope, especially from youth. Moreover, there is an almost dying need to save the planet and ourselves.

My advice is to:

- Learn from the local districts in California with its “Four Synergistic S’s” (Shared Vision, Steady Work, Systemness, and Symmetry) that accelerated change by leveraging state investments in college and career pathways.
- Take advantage of the recent interest in career and technical education.
- Make individual and social purpose your *raison d’être*.
- Go for it like South Australia is doing and take a chance in inviting students and teachers to the change table.
- Redefine accountability metrics beyond standardised tests.
- Gain professional as well as political power by doing something worthwhile.
- Co-determine the nature and process of change with teachers and students as Anaheim is doing. Be a rebel with a cause.

Additionally, you could step back and brainstorm on my recommendation: “Intrigue the top” with or without their participation. Never second guess a given individual or group’s interest or lack thereof in change. We have also been formulating new ideas and strategies that create the conditions that make it more likely that a significant change initiative will be undertaken and/or taken up. I have always found “nuance” to be one of the most “change-rich” change concepts around (I wrote a whole book on it, Fullan, 2019). Now we have to build embedded nuance into our change strategy. Here is what we have found in the past three years by working closely with practitioners who seem increasingly willing to get going. One of the most difficult problems in system change is how does one accomplish change with a large group or system? One example you could delve into is the study we commissioned from Sarah Fine and Jal Mehta (2024). They had studied and produced an award-winning book, *In Search of Deep Learning* (Mehta & Fine, 2019). These authors had a major grant from a foundation to locate and study schools across the United States that were engaged in “deep learning.” The authors spent more than a year across the US doing site visits of promising schools only to find that there was “little there.” Hence the title, *In search of* ...

We began our own foray into deep learning in 2015. One of our successful cases we thought was the Ottawa Catholic School Board (OCSB) in Ontario. Here was a school district with some 47,000 students, and 87 schools. We invited Fine and Mehta to conduct a case study of OCSB claiming that it was an example of system-wide large-scale success. They were doubtful that deep learning success on this level was possible, but took the assignment. They titled their report “A ‘big tent’ for system-wide change” (Fine & Mehta, 2024). We consider OCSB to be a great example of achieving “proximity to practice” along with “specificity without imposition” which is the art of achieving large scale change without anyone imposing it.

I offer “proximity” and “specificity” as key (nuanced) concepts for achieving large case success. The change effort is jointly determined, people develop ownership as they sort out implementation, leaders at all levels engage in proximity to practice, practice itself gets refined (specificity) through the process of implementation (what works and what doesn’t). This is where the new approach to accountability comes namely, “no amount of ‘external accountability’ is effective in the absence of good ‘internal accountability’” (see Fullan, 2019, chapter 4).

Lead Article

It is a nuanced process to be sure but “specificity, transparency, non-judgmentalism” (big nuance here) serve to give people confidence in the quality of the process. There is always noise. Our final section on the combination of new leadership skills that I present shortly reinforces the likelihood that this process becomes embraced by the majority of people in the situation. This is what I think is happening in our six California case examples (Fine, Rincon-Gallardo & Fullan, in press).

Finally, I should note that as part and parcel of “proximity to practice” is the use of AI. In terms of “Drivers” I have argued that pedagogy is the driver and technology is the accelerator (Fullan, 2011, p.18). This means two things. If you don’t have your “pedagogy and learning” ideas in order, keep AI at arms-length. Learn, and keep learning about AI but don’t depend on it, until you know your learning, and wellbeing foundation principles. Once you have made pedagogy (i.e., learning partnerships between students and teachers) your main cumulative driver make AI a prominent partner. We are using this approach in AUHSD where we have partnered with a non-profit technology company, eKadence, in developing alignment and proximity to us including customised Apps for the five Cs to monitor and enhance these competencies. Teachers and students have information about their progress and its nature literally on a daily basis. This is the ultimate in proximity to practice.

More broadly Mollick (2024) has provided four important guidelines/principles to help us evolve with AI, so to speak:

Principle 1: Always invite AI to the table.

Principle 2: Be the human in the loop.

Principle 3: Treat AI like a person (but tell it what kind of person it is).

Principle 4: Assume that this is the worst AI you will ever use.

Finally, we have a partnership with the University of Melbourne to assess the six Global Competencies or new metrics as we call them (Melbourne Metrics, 2024).

The new leadership in a nutshell

I have been assembling over the past three years a master list, called “The Leadership Tool Kit” (Fullan & Tinney, 2024) to capture a new version of five leadership qualities aligned with transformative leadership. (My thanks to former Surrey BC Superintendent, Jordan Tinney, and to Western Australian Consultant Brendan Spillane for working on the development of this kit).

Figure 7: Core Concepts for System Transformation



From *Leadership Tool Kit*, by M. Fullan and J. Tinney, 2024, Michael Fullan Motion Leadership (www.michaelfullan.ca)

“It is finally time to break with our past which at best expected slow, ad hoc ‘sprouts,’ and replace this with a sustained effort at cultivating and spreading many examples of system success at the middle level and beyond.”

Although I will refer to the leader of the organisation in the following discussion, the five leadership traits should be thought of as applying to virtually *all members of the organisation* including students.

1. *Spirit work* represents a deep commitment to humans and other forms of life to preserving and enhancing their success and wellbeing. We used to call this “moral purpose,” but this dimension has taken on other deeper meanings in the past decade. In education, spirit work can be defined as the actions and accomplishments that leaders and others undertake to enable everyone to cope, grow, and develop under the complex and adverse conditions of contemporary society. Among other things it should help people realise their purpose and place in today’s world. It represents a commitment to all learners (Fullan & Tinney, 2024, p. 10).
2. *Contextual literacy* concerns one’s knowledge of, commitment to, and caring for the situation or culture in which one leads. When a new leader joins an organisation to a certain extent they are by definition “a learner relative to that context.” They must become an “apprentice” in the new context. They should also be an expert in leadership in some respects (presumably the reasons they were hired). Thus, new leaders can be considered both an expert and an apprentice and in fact they should always be a learner. When you combine spirit work and contextual literacy you create the conditions for compassionate, connected and committed leaders to improve and transform the setting in which they live and work (Fullan & Tinney, 2024, p. 13).
3. *Connected autonomy* is not a continuum. It is a single state of being simultaneously connected to, and autonomous within, a given context. It allows you to explicitly consider your contributions to the group, what you are learning from others, and how in combination you are shaping the organisation as a whole. On any given day you are aware of your own autonomous being and role, and your connected contribution to the group’s quests. Both aspects are important, complementary (feed on each other), may be fused (Fullan & Tinney, 2024, p. 15).
4. *Legacy leaders* are simultaneously appointing and developing leaders as they go; but they are also aware of how many good leaders they will leave behind after they depart. This is legacy leadership: improve the present and influence the future even after you leave your post (Fullan & Tinney, 2024, p. 17).
5. *Systemness* is awareness of the “systems” in which you live—locally, regionally and state/county wide. Such leadership should enable and foster a sense of knowing and belonging to the system relative to all members of the organisation. Admittedly, there is a growing problem when subsystems are intensely internally loyal to its own members, but hostile to external individuals and groups. Note, however, that our set of factors represents cross checks and synergy (Fullan & Tinney, 2024, p. 19).

Conclusion

I have stated that 2025 could be “take off time” for transformative systems development. The need is pressing, we know enough to push into a better future. Such movement will depend more on the bottom and the middle than the top. It is a choice depending on how you want to spend your time.

There is one powerful force that could be released: youth! We need co-direction with the young, not voice or agency which is too passive. Increasingly adults are acting as if things are in total collapse. Youth is more ambivalent. They operate in the present and are acutely aware of the ills we face. Yet, they have the capacity to leap into the future. One rich area we are currently exploring is “transcendent thinking” (Immordino, 2025). Given neurological research that has proven that teens can experience a brain growth which among other things can enable them to think beyond the “here and now” into alternative purposes, we are now working on restructuring high schools to enable alternative experiences that do not confine them to the status quo. These experiences should help them to push themselves and others to alternative futures compatible with a better future. This is precisely what we are doing in AUHSD—real present time resulting in real better futures. That will be our next article. Students and educators together will lead it. This new reality is just around the corner.

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