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The Sustainability of Innovative Schools as Learning Organizations and Professional Learning Communities During Standardized Reform

Corrie Giles
Andy Hargreaves

Background: *Implicitly, innovative schools have historically contained some (but not usually all) of the properties of learning organizations and professional learning communities but have a weak record of sustaining success over time. Can innovative schools that self-consciously establish themselves as learning organizations and professional learning communities sustain their early promise of success in the face of the predictable cycle of the “attrition of change”; of pressure and envy in the surrounding district, profession, and community; and of the historically specific and recent pressure of standardized reform?*

Purpose: *This article explores the impact of these influences on three innovative schools and their sustainability over time. It concentrates in particular on the promise and viability of one of these schools, which has been consciously modeled as a learning organization and professional learning community.*

Conclusions: *Although further research is required, the article concludes that the learning organization and professional learning community model may provide a more robust resistance to conventional processes of the attrition of change and of surrounding change forces, but much like other innovative schools, it also shows signs of defaulting to conventional patterns of schooling in the face of standardized reform.*

Keywords: *innovative schools; sustainability; learning organizations; professional learning communities; standardized reform*

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Despite the evolution of the “knowledge society” (Hargreaves, 2003), secondary schooling with its age-graded, subject-based curriculum, and lesson-by-lesson schedule has proved remarkably resistant to the influence

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of successive reform movements. Historically, recurring challenges to this “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) have been made by experiments with “fresh start” innovative schools, some of which have achieved national and international recognition for promoting new ideas such as student-centered, experiential, democratic, collegial, and community-oriented approaches to teaching and learning (Armstrong, Henson, & Savage, 1997). Yet although innovative schools can provide “quick success” demonstrations of desired futures, longitudinal studies of innovative schools, such as Lincoln Acres (Gold & Miles, 1981), Kensington (Smith, Dwyer, Prunty, & Klein, 1987), and Countesthorpe (Fletcher, Caron, & Williams, 1985), evidence a well-documented tendency to fade after an initial “golden age” and become embroiled in community controversy and strife, to rejoin the mainstream and soon look like any other school or to vanish altogether (Dormeus, 1981).

Three factors appear to contribute to the weak record of sustainability of innovative schools over time. First, they tend to be perceived by fellow professionals as being unlike “real schools” (Metz, 1991), not merely because of their unusual structures but also because of the additional resources they typically receive at “start up,” coupled with the latitude they are given to hand-pick the best teachers and leaders from the local district and beyond. Likewise, there is a tendency for innovative schools to “create animosity and resistance to change in other schools” (Fink, 2000, p. xiv) and thereby threaten the long-term persistence and spread or “scaling up” of new ideas (Hargreaves & Fink, 2000; Smith et al., 1987).

Second, innovative schools seem to possess a predictable, evolutionary life span of creativity and experimentation, overreaching and entropy, and survival and continuity (Fink, 2000). Changing leadership, the gradual loss and replacement of key faculty, changes in the size or composition of the student body, and shifts in policy or the district’s attention to other priorities amount to an “attrition of change” that leads to the school’s seemingly inevitable decline. As these forces exert their cumulative effect, then parental expectations, pressures from surrounding institutions, and some teachers’ own traditional inclinations draw the school’s center of gravity back toward the conventional grammar of schooling.

A third set of circumstances also weakens the sustainability of innovative schools over time. Typically, these circumstances are characterized by historically critical incidents or changes in the external context, such as reductions in resources and changing power relations between states and local school districts. More recently, researchers in Britain (Ball & Bowe, 1992; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998) and Canada (Hargreaves et al., 2000) have noted the tendency for large-scale reform to displace locally initiated innovation and to

reassert and reinforce traditional grammars of schooling. McNeil (2000) reported similar negative effects of the standardized Texas Accountability System on innovative magnet schools in Houston, particularly with respect to disadvantaged student populations.

Innovative schools therefore seem especially imperiled by standardized reform movements. The question that remains is whether there are other innovative models of school that are more resilient than those previously discussed in the literature, particularly when faced with the potentially destabilizing effect of standardized reform.

Since the emergence of Peter Senge's (1990) *The Fifth Discipline*, a number of influential writers have advocated that schools in complex, knowledge-using societies should become learning organizations (e.g., Fullan, 1993; Leithwood & Louis, 1998; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). As learning organizations, schools would develop innovative structures and processes that enable them to develop the professional capacity to learn in, and respond quickly and flexibly to, their unpredictable and changing environments (Lipton & Melamede, 1997; Strain, 2000). They would operate as genuine communities that draw on the collective power of a shared vision and the collective intelligence (Brown & Lauder, 2001) of their human resources in pursuit of continuous improvement (Deming, 1986). Through "systems thinking," their members would be able to see the "big picture" of their organizations and understand how parts and whole were interrelated and how actions in one domain create consequences in another. They would see the connections between people's personal and interpersonal learning, and how the organization learned collectively, as the key to change and success (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Mulford, 1998).

Linking these ideas to the writing of Wenger (1998) on communities of practice, school improvement advocates have recommended that effective schools should also operate as strong professional learning communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999). Professional learning communities in schools emphasize three key components: collaborative work and discussion among the school's professionals, a strong and consistent focus on teaching and learning within that collaborative work, and the collection and use of assessment and other data to inquire into and evaluate progress over time (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Instead of bringing about "quick fixes" of superficial change, they are sufficiently flexible and adaptable to create and support sustainable improvements that last over time because, through teamwork and dispersed leadership, they build the professional capacity to solve problems and make decisions expeditiously (Senge, 2000).

Professional learning communities are especially difficult to establish and maintain in high schools, where collaborative relationships are particularly hard to achieve in the face of an historical legacy of top-down administration and fragmented departmentalized subject-based communities (Fink, 2000; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Talbert, 1995).

Yet learning organizations are not without their critics. Although they are promoted as a means of empowering postmodern reflexivity by facilitating social learning in unconventional structures, the continuing grip of modernity may limit empowerment by making it difficult for learning organizations to create the flexibility and learning space necessary to “free the agency of self” from the “technoculture” of the past (Quicke, 2000; Rifkin & Fulop, 1997). Such superficial manifestations of learning organizations and professional learning communities would be prone to “interactional congeniality” rather than probing deeply into issues that sometimes divide educators (Hargreaves, 1994, 1999). Like all communities, learning communities can become victims of “groupthink,” where members insulate themselves from alternative ideas—turning shared visions into shared delusions (Fielding, 1999; Hord, 1987). Some learning organizations can also promote learning among their own professionals but not with the community, the district, or the wider profession (Fenwick, 2000). Last, the literature on learning organizations and learning communities has been criticized for perpetuating “control by stealth” by overemphasizing formal cognitive processes of problem-solving, systems-thinking, and collective inquiry at the expense of the informal relationships and social networks that build a strong sense of professional community (Field, 1997; Hargreaves, 1998; Mulford, 1998).

In summary, longitudinal studies of innovative schools point to three common forces behind their eventual decline or demise: envy and anxiety among competing institutions in the surrounding system, the evolutionary process of aging and decline in the organizational life cycle, and the regressive effects of large-scale, standardized reform strategies. The next section of this article briefly examines how these forces have undermined the sustainability of innovation in two cases, Lord Byron and Durant, in ways that largely confirm the existing literature. The main part of the article then undertakes a more detailed analysis of a third, more recently established school—Blue Mountain—one that shares many characteristics of innovation in common with its two predecessors. The question the article addresses is whether the consciously designed learning organization and professional learning community model represented by Blue Mountain has the potential to offset the threats to the sustainability of innovative schools previously identified in the literature and exemplified in the other two cases.

METHOD

This article focuses on Blue Mountain, one of three particularly innovative secondary schools that form part of an eight-school international research project¹ in the province of Ontario, Canada, and in New York State. Conducted over 4 years, this project explored teacher and administrator perceptions of change over time in a variety of urban and suburban settings. Case study data were gathered for all three schools by recording semistructured interviews with a random sample of retired and active teachers and administrators representing cohorts from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.² Additional data were obtained from ethnographic observations made during school visits; from attending daytime and evening meetings with faculty, students, parents, and state officials; and from school, district and state/provincial documents. The three sets of data were then triangulated, coded, and organized thematically in relation to the emergent characteristics that had evidently shaped the innovative life histories of all three schools.

Because the innovative school data presented in this article emerged from a wider study called *Change Over Time*, no claim is made that these three case studies are directly comparable for the purpose of cross-case analysis. Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the data obtained from our wider study, a qualitative case survey (Merriam, 1988) revealed a number of plausible patterns and common themes (Miles & Huberman, 1984) that warranted further investigation: in particular, the negative impact of standardized reform in three intentionally innovative schools that, from new, had been implicitly or explicitly configured as learning organizations and professional learning communities.

Although patterns of events and critical incidents were determined to have impacted all three schools in similar ways and with comparable effects, the conclusions presented here are not intended to be generalizable to all schools but to raise issues and highlight questions for further and more extensive research.

RESULTS

Lord Byron: The Attrition of Change

Lord Byron is a largely middle-class Ontario high school that was established in 1973 as a break-the-mold, innovative institution. Yet by the late 1990s, Lord Byron had succumbed to the three change forces that beset innovative schools—competitive pressure, evolutionary attrition of change, and

standardized reforms—to such an extent as to be almost indistinguishable from a conventional high school. In its day, Lord Byron was lauded as the most innovative high school in the province. Over time, though, three distinct, but at times overlapping, periods of attrition became discernable in the evolving life history of the school. The “formative years” of the 1970s were described by teachers as being full of collaboration, experimentation, challenge, and learning. The school had a semestered timetable that created longer lesson periods so as to permit more creative patterns of instruction. It was designed with open architecture to encourage teacher collaboration and flexible learning. It established interdisciplinary departments, team teaching, individualized learning programs, and unscheduled student time during the school day. After delicate negotiations with the teachers’ union, a model of differentiated staffing was established that enabled the teachers in the school to vary class sizes slightly to save resources that could then be spent on other kinds of staff support, such as professional development, secretarial assistance, or high-quality teaching materials. The young and charismatically led “pioneer” faculty remembered this as the “golden age” in the life history of the school—one that was exhilarating, enriching, exciting, and like “a family.” As a founding member of the Lord Byron Women’s Group, which had been founded to challenge the initial male-dominated leadership and culture of the school, recalled,

It was a school that operated on ideas that were significantly ahead of their time. A high level of collegiality was expected by people who were there. They simply assumed they worked in teams and partnerships. I haven’t seen that degree of interdependence and influence until very recently at a school. An offshoot of that is that the staff feel very strongly that they owned the school as much as the kids or the administration did. And I think that accounts, to some extent, for the increase in women’s interest in leadership.

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw commitment and loyalty to the original vision of Byron start to fade as overreaching and entropy began to take hold. These “attrition years” were characterized by regression, retrenchment, and loss of learning—a slow but insidious slide back toward formal structures and traditional administrative processes. A number of critical incidents or trends were of particular significance during these attrition years. Failure to pay attention to succession planning meant that the charisma of the founding principal was difficult to replace as he and key pioneer faculty left the school for promotion elsewhere in the system. New administrators were felt to be “out of tune” with the democratic, egalitarian, and innovative approach to education favored by the faculty. As one teacher remarked, they “could sing the song but didn’t know the music.” As the school grew from 900 to

2,000 students by the 1977 school year, it no longer felt like a family. Departments became large, meaningful dialogue within faculty meetings became unrealistic, and communications within the school deteriorated. One experienced teacher commented, "The large hirings at the time meant that people didn't really know what the philosophy of the school was. People hadn't bought into the philosophy." As a result, it was hard to socialize a critical mass of newly recruited faculty into the school's existing culture and mission.

No sooner had student numbers peaked than they began to decline, partly in line with falling provincial birth rates but also as a result of disenchanted parents beginning to move their children to an academic high school nearby. Rather than build on the parental support that was once nurtured through an innovative parent council, administrators increasingly allowed falling enrollments to divert their attention away from the political interface with the community. Attracted by Byron's radical reputation, the questionable professionalism of a number of "left wing" faculty who dressed in jeans, wore open-toed sandals, and used crude language in the presence of students added to the school's already tarnished image. Some teachers encouraged overfamiliarity by allowing students to call them by their first names. Others saw checking attendance and challenging the poor behavior of students as denials of personal freedom. Another teacher saw nothing wrong in having an affair with a student. Although parents had become more accepting of Byron's student-centered philosophy coupled with high expectations, contrary evidence of ill-defined homework assignments, lax pedagogy, poor attendance, and the behavior of a minority of students who made their presence felt outside the school during unsupervised spare periods did not sit well with a predominantly middle- to upper-middle-class community. Another teacher recalled, "We spent all of our energy in the last 2 or 3 years I was there, '78, '80, '81, working on public relations. That was our main focus. How were we going to change the perception of the community?" Gradually, new but more traditional programs were introduced to appease critics. Yet a failure to consolidate innovation and the ever-present need to evaluate programs as proof of the success of the school led to overreaching, entropy, and burnout. The loss of community support also coincided with new ministry and district directives and with a change of CEO at district level, which further undermined Lord Byron's innovative structures. Although the new CEO brought a more even-handed approach to all schools in the district, this resulted in a reduction in the tacit permission previously granted to Lord Byron to take risks and break rules.

By the mid-1980s, Lord Byron was entering a third period in its life history—that of survival and continuity. There was a half-empty building to

fill. Physical space and the school's caring reputation led administrators to place both the district Life Skills Program for "mentally challenged students" and the regional school for 30 severely and multihandicapped youngsters at Lord Byron. The principal at that time recalled that these initiatives generated little "flack from staff, or students or parents and helped to keep the school viable." Nevertheless, subsequent principals continued to struggle to rebuild the reputation of the school in the 1980s, balancing the student-centered approach of Lord Byron against elitist community pressure for academic and athletic excellence. Concerned at the loss of the top 5% of students to their (perceived) more academic competitor, French immersion and segregated gifted programs were introduced as part of a "repackaging" of academic programs. In a school where "everyone made the team and got an equal chance to play—and winning was not important," a competitive athletics program was also introduced to cater to scholarship-oriented athletics students.

By 1992, although still a caring and student-centered school, yet another new principal (the eighth in 24 years) felt that, despite Lord Byron now looking much like any other Ontario high school, it was "still pretty unique in terms of the program it offers." Although no longer initiating change, he felt that the school was still more willing to respond to externally mandated changes than other schools in the district, especially when they helped to perpetuate the student-centered philosophy. For example, Lord Byron embraced The Transition Years (grades 7 to 9 reform) initiative of the early 1990s, which detracked grade 9. Compared to others, the school's plan was "probably the most drastic in its changes or philosophy, and that reflects back on the staff from way back when. . . . It provided Byron with mechanisms to do things they have always wanted to do and were going to do anyway."

Despite paying continuous attention to the image of the school, enrollment fell to 700 students in 1995. As pioneer faculty retired or were redeployed to other schools, the collective memory of what Lord Byron uniquely stood for was gradually extinguished. What few structures and traditions remained from the "golden years" struggled to survive as an increasingly pressured faculty was overwhelmed by the impact of the standardized approach to learning mandated by the Ontario government. A 24-year veteran teacher observed that the school was now principal centered. In the past, "more things came back to the staff for OKs." There was more of a resentful feeling that administrators and middle-level leaders were making decisions "behind closed doors" and that information needed to be found out via the "grapevine." The female principal and vice principal admitted this when they described how they were required to implement new assessment practices and report cards in a compressed time frame and in a way that would not tolerate noncompliance. The reduction in size of the school and increase in size

of special needs and adult education “satellites” using the building made the regular classroom teachers feel marginalized in the previously shared decision-making process because there were now so few of them. Departments such as math and science had been merged, and programs such as family studies had been fragmented and dispersed between departments. Teachers were also required to teach subjects in which, although qualified, they had little primary interest. Lack of time, lack of connectedness between faculty and administrators, and lack of meaning in their work created a sense of professional nostalgia and personal loss for those few veteran teachers who remained: “We were always available for the kids, I have always thought of this as a kids school [but] . . . the structure and philosophy is long gone.”

At the end of the century, the financially driven merger of Byron’s more-than-half-empty building with a local vocational high school has, in effect, closed this formerly innovative school altogether.

Durant: Activism and Advocacy

The second innovative school in our study, Durant, opened in 1971 with 150 students. Located in a declining “rust-belt” city in the northeastern United States, Durant was founded toward the end of a period of great social upheaval, political strife, and racial unrest. Galvanized into action by a riot in their local high school and what they perceived as a heavy-handed and overly bureaucratic response, a small group of teachers and parents, supported by the then-superintendent, put together a proposal for a small alternative high school. Because of its lack of a formal school building, nonhierarchical structures, close supportive relationships, and community learning orientation, Durant quickly became a school where teachers and students alike mutually enjoyed the freedom and experimentation of a non-school-based curriculum. Yet efforts to attract alienated students from all socioeconomic and racial backgrounds were largely unsuccessful, and Durant overwhelmingly attracted White, middle-class “dropouts” (83% of the students).

Despite being largely successful in its 1st year, Durant soon faced closure by a conservative and fiscally challenged school district. Teachers and community members mounted a vociferous campaign in the local media to prevent the closure. Students, newly conversant with the latest technology, quickly filmed a promotional video about the school that aired in a local shopping mall. The elected founding principal networked with influential school council members of an innovative local elementary school also slated for closure. Faced with such a well-orchestrated and activist stance (which was to become the hallmark of this school), Durant was granted a reprieve from closure by the school board.

Not surprisingly, pioneer teachers felt that in the early stages of its life history, Durant was an exciting and innovative place to be. The multidisciplinary community-based program meant that teachers had to be flexible and adaptable in terms of what and how they taught. The school also experimented from the outset with nonscheduled, unsupervised time for students during the school day. Internal change and learning were ongoing as staff and students struggled to put their ideal school and its distinct and unique curriculum into practice. Weekly staff meetings often continued long into the night. Staff quickly learned to limit the wide smorgasbord of educationally questionable and resource-hungry community-based classes. To increase participation and silence a vociferous minority, the practice of “one person one vote” in the weekly town hall meeting of the whole school was also altered. New ideas were still introduced in the town hall forum but discussed and voted on in small groups.

Toward the end of the 1970s, Durant entered a period of gradual attrition in its life history, which, like Lord Byron, also required ongoing adaptation and compromise. As the largely White, pioneer student body began to graduate, a more ethnically diverse student body replaced them. Although desperate to escape from underperforming and violent high schools elsewhere in the district, these new students did not always share the founding vision of the school. Staff attempted to counter this shift by changing the school’s admissions policy to include an interview with a counselor, who used a faculty-developed profile to determine whether Durant would be a good fit for a prospective student. Pioneer teachers left but, unlike Lord Byron, new teachers were carefully interviewed and selected by Durant’s still small and intimate community, in line with the vision of the school. State mandates in the 1970s were largely “colonized” by the school’s flexible structural arrangements and innovative curriculum design. Rather than imposing standardized “seat time” on all students, one pioneer teacher recalled being able to meet external mandates in creative ways that continued to support the school’s vision of developing students as independent learners.

I remember some ways that we figured out how to use the system to the benefit of the kids that other people found disturbing, but I found wonderful because we weren’t doing things just to follow the rules, but rather we were doing things just because they made sense. So that it didn’t matter how a kid learned something as long as they could pass the [state] testing and get credit for the course. . . . So we had kids who were, in essence, signing up and taking [state] exams and getting credit for things that they didn’t have the seat time in. . . . I remember learning ways to get around the system versus learning ways that the system didn’t work for us.

By the 1980s, the pressures from external accountability mandates increased and were less easily assimilated. Like Lord Byron, Durant entered a period of regression, retrenchment, and loss of professional learning. These conditions coincided with the district designating Durant a magnet school in an attempt to comply with federal desegregation policy. As part of a growing trend toward centralization that was characteristic of the 1980s, authority to admit new students was transferred from Durant to the district. Although the school could still screen and interview prospective candidates, federal statutes regarding the need for magnet schools to abide by specific racial quotas limited the number of White students—the school's predominant racial group. This policy change led to a rapid decline in Durant's population from 150 to 110 students and a marked proportional increase of both minority students and students in poverty. The change in size of the school meant that key pioneer faculty were lost, class sizes increased, the distinctive elective program shrank, and the school's ability to fully use the community as a resource diminished. The district and state compounded the school's difficulties by mandating an extended curriculum and further testing, thereby reducing the scope for flexibility and choice that had characterized Durant's innovative curriculum. One teacher commented that these moves toward standardization had reduced "the spontaneity and the creativity of teachers in developing courses . . . and I can't say that it's helped the students in any way."

Durant continued to strive to ensure the sustainability of its efforts, though. For instance, when the founding principal announced his retirement in 1985, Durant, unlike Lord Byron, paid attention to succession planning by hiring his successor as an assistant administrator during a 2-year transition. Nevertheless, the new principal brought further change and pressure to the Durant community by refocusing the vision of the school toward greater accountability. He believed that students needed to be able to demonstrate their competence as independent learners through portfolios and exhibitions. Pioneer faculty disagreed, preferring to support a yearlong independent learning project traditionally required of all seniors. The new principal also introduced a policy of vigorously recruiting students to reverse declining enrollments. Ironically, increased enrollment allowed more conservatively minded "settler" teachers with little attachment to the original vision of the school to replace pioneer teachers as they retired and oppose the views of those few who remained. With an increase in size, Durant also felt more overcrowded, making it more difficult to socialize students to the norms of the school. As poverty levels increased from 15% to 43% between 1985 and 1995, the much-changed composition of the larger student body meant that ill-disciplined students became more numerous and their presence was more widely felt.

Although the state and district placed further restrictions on Durant in terms of curriculum and standards-based assessment, a new district superintendent was appointed in 1990 who allowed schools to manage their own budget. Having control of its own enrollment-driven budget released a new wave of innovation and creativity at Durant. A veteran teacher enthused about the additional resources: "They gave us extra staff and extra money every year. . . . I mean, our class numbers were down. We had all kinds of electives. It was wonderful and we made use of it."

In 1996, Durant entered a third and possibly final stage in its roller coaster life history, that of survival. Having grown from 148 students in 1990, to 185 in 1995, the financial autonomy of the now-larger school was revoked by the district. To save money, the faculty was downsized, and with the retirement or resignation of the final three pioneer faculty, little collective memory of the very early days of the school remained. Class sizes were increased by 25%, which left fewer teachers to struggle with many more less-able students and students in poverty. As one experienced teacher remarked, "When you've got kids who have needs such as personal safety and drug problems, abuse problems, education is something that's low on the list of priorities." In 1997, as part of a further tightening of its accountability-driven reform measures, the state mandated that all students must pass five high-stakes subject-based tests to graduate. This mandate squeezed out much of the remaining flexibility that Durant had left in its schedule to deliver its unique mission. No public schools were to be exempt from the new regulations. Professionally obliged to teach to the new tests, teachers felt that they were no longer able to cater to the individual needs of their students and that standardization had taken away both "their professional judgement and autonomy" and sucked "the creativity out of teaching." One long-serving faculty member concluded, "It's very sad because we're becoming more and more like a traditional high school with our course offerings. No question about that."

Whereas Durant, like Lord Byron, had demonstrated an ability to accommodate the gradual attrition of change and to withstand the consequences of district-based and other external policy changes, by the 1990s Durant's teachers were no longer able to "colonize" the cumulative impact of large-scale standardized reform on their own. Prompted by student dissatisfaction with the negative impact of new state-driven, high-stakes testing requirements on its innovative curriculum, Durant responded to this new external threat by banding together in its activist way with other similar innovative schools in the state. The school mounted a 3-year campaign to lobby parents, the media, the state commissioner for education, and state legislators to gain a variance from the new tests on the grounds that the school already met or exceeded the legislated requirements.

Although reenergized by winning its temporary exemption from state tests in March 2000, the alien nature and unrelenting pace of standardized reform has undermined the capacity of Durant to innovate and deliver its shared vision of what constitutes effective schooling for the students it serves. Neither does the school look or feel the way it once did. Hidden away in a quiet neighborhood, it has doubled in size, received extensive renovations, and become much more recognizable as a “real school”—a far cry from its 1st year when it really was a school “without walls.”

Blue Mountain: A Learning Community

Situated in a middle- to upper-middle-class neighborhood, Blue Mountain opened in 1994 as a purpose-built and academically oriented suburban high school (grades 9 to 13) with 620 students, 32 faculty, and 2 administrators. With space for 1,250 students, the school had grown by an average of 100 students a year to reach near capacity by the academic year 2000/2001. Thirty percent of these students are visible minorities, predominantly of East Indian descent.

Blue Mountain was planned from the outset as a continuously improving learning organization and professional learning community. Supported by a district with a 30-year history of opening innovative schools, the charismatic founding principal was appointed 3 years prior to the school opening. He had the time to be able to work closely with the architect, local community, and pioneer faculty to collaboratively develop an innovative but shared vision for the future of the school. During these key formative years, the building was designed to encourage social interaction between faculty (dispersed workrooms) and between students (a tiered forum in the school lobby and mall-like configuration of key student services), and was wired and equipped with the latest technology to support the curriculum and network all communications in the building. This socially configured work space served to support a flexible and adaptable community of learners and to prepare students to live and work in a healthy, technologically advanced knowledge society (Hargreaves, 2003).

The formative years in the life cycle of Blue Mountain occurred approximately 2 years before and after it opened (1992-1996). During this creative and experimental period, the culture of Blue Mountain was shaped by six key factors that contributed to the school’s resilience when faced with the predictable threats associated with the attrition of change, with district and community pressure, and more recently with the destabilizing impact of standardized reform. These factors include the nature, distribution, and succession of leadership; the school’s vision and goals; the impact on teaching of the

personal growth and learning of the teachers; the teachers' orientation to curriculum, teaching, and learning; the development of innovative structural and administrative arrangements; and the growth of a caring community.

Founding leadership. The founding principal of Blue Mountain had an unconventional background for a leader of a prestigious new school. With experience as a special needs teacher and administrator in both elementary and vocational high schools, the principal's approach to leadership combined his wide-ranging professional experience with that of being a former professional athlete and coach and an avid reader of learning organization and leadership theory. Drawing on all this, the principal worked with teachers and staff to build a vision of a student-centered community of care based on strong relationships, mutual respect, the importance of family, and of achieving balanced personal and professional lives (Sergiovanni, 1994). The idea of organizational learning and systems thinking permeated almost everything the founding principal did. When the school district unexpectedly encountered hostility after announcing its plans for the new school in a top-down way, he set up monthly meetings with the community, leading to the creation of a school council in 1992, long before school councils became official policy within the province. Parents, administrators, and pioneer faculty collaborated on defining the school mission and graduating outcomes, openly shared information and data on the progress of the school, and determined how to undertake an annual assessment of the organization and its effectiveness.

Before hiring the pioneer faculty, the founding principal used systems thinking to consider the interrelationships with and consequences for its wider professional community. To avoid accusations of "stealing all of the good people from all of the other schools," he negotiated selection criteria with the district that ensured his school would match the general teacher demographic profile in the district and that "no other school would end up being burdened by the loss of too many people."

The sustainability of the school's success over time was another key systems issue that the founding principal considered. In a district that regularly rotated its principals, he was alert to the threats posed by leadership succession (Hargreaves & Fink, 2000; Macmillan, 2000). In modeling and facilitating a people-centered and distributed approach to leadership (Crowther, Kaagan, Hahn, & Ferguson, 2002), he created a philosophy and supporting organizational structures that would survive his inevitable departure and "perpetuate what we are doing." This was achieved, in part, by negotiating a contract variance with the local teachers' union so as not to allocate the initial leadership team of 10 teachers to traditional subject-based administrative roles and, in part, by adopting a team-based problem-solving structure. It

was important “not to compartmentalize” and to ensure the staff “had a schoolwide perspective from the beginning.” Instead of being top-down and principal-directed, meetings were carefully shaped according to learning organization principles and were facilitated so that generative learning could occur through social interaction (Senge, 2000). In the founding principal’s own words,

All our meetings started with systems issues where people were free to identify problems they were having at a systems level so that we could deal with them and remove fear from the organization. To say that there’s something not working is what we wanted to promote so that we could deal with it as opposed to hiding it for fear that you might be blamed for it.

His sentiments regarding the value of systems thinking were echoed by pioneer staff.

Philosophically, [the founding principal] and I were totally in line. We used to share books back and forth and so the philosophy, the systems thinking, the continuous improvement approach, the teacher leadership concepts rather than [being] top-down, [provided] the freedom to initiate, carry through, with [the founding principal] sort of being there as a coach but staying out of the way and letting you do your job and be a leader with others and work collaboratively.

These principles extended to individual advisory sessions and collective Teacher Advisory Group (TAG) meetings with students which, according to the founding principal, “became an opportunity for kids to accept responsibility for the organization and to provide input into concerns that they might have and to make recommendations for change.”

Vision and goals. Exemplifying one of the key ideas of effective professional learning communities, the principal developed a shared vision of student learning as the central purpose of the school. As one pioneer teacher commented, “I’d never been in a place where the priority was so much the student; and for me, that’s it—all that matters is the student.” The principal believed that achieving this vision required a systems-thinking professional culture that engaged teachers, support staff, students, and the wider community in defining the organization’s goals and acquiring the learning necessary to overcome the threats to achieving and sustaining them. Guided by seven collaboratively determined and self-assessed goals (known as exit outcomes), the school established the idea of being a “learning community” as the core of its mission: “To be a Center for lifelong learning responding to the community.” The mission and goals, in other words, stress high-quality, life-

long learning for students, learning for and among staff, and learning from the community. They are, in one pioneer teacher's words, "the philosophical glue that defines the place."

Teachers. Typical of innovative schools in their early golden years, the pioneer teachers who came to work at Blue Mountain were, literally, exceptional. Attracted by the vision and goals of the school, teachers lobbied or were invited to apply for a position in what they anticipated as being a challenging and stimulating professional environment. Obtaining a teaching appointment was not easy. The founding principal and vice principal recalled having a "long checklist" of selection criteria, three of the most important being an unswerving commitment to students, a willingness to learn, and an evident capacity to live a balanced life. One pioneer teacher recalled that it had taken "five meetings and four interviews to get into this building."

As a result of this rigorous selection process, the teachers recruited to Blue Mountain had a broad range of interests and parallel careers, which suggested that their personal decisions to become teachers had been more of a thoughtful journey than a graduation event. Many had been drawn into the profession from other walks of life. This brought not only diverse experiences and a rich source of outside learning into their teaching work but also a work ethic that valued autonomy, responsibility, and creativity. In the words of one pioneer teacher, "You could be as creative as you could possibly be and it was valued."

In common with Lord Byron and Durant, teachers at Blue Mountain described their experiences of this stage in the life history of the school as "exciting," "having fun," "wonderfully creative," "electrifying," even "heaven." As one teacher put it, "It was like, 'I get paid for this?' This is a great place to be." Teachers were excited about the new opportunities for interacting with colleagues, engaging in risk taking and experimenting in their teaching with developing innovative ways to engage students more effectively in their learning. As one veteran teacher expressed it, "This school gave me the opportunity to experiment. I was a traditional teacher, I think, . . . so it's been a wonderful catalyst for me to grow and learn."

Many teachers felt that they had experienced accelerated professional growth through belonging to a community of learners in which new ways of working and thinking were internalized and rapidly became recognizable as their "philosophy in practice." A new teacher was especially appreciative of this strong professional culture.

My philosophy is not only supported by administration, but that is the way they see education as well. I think my ability to integrate my philosophy into my

classroom has sped up. I've been able to accelerate my own professional development because I am sitting around a community of teachers that all share my philosophy and that have the philosophy of sharing materials and talking about lesson plans. And in a lot of schools you don't see that. In a lot of schools, each teacher just goes to their classroom and teaches their class and doesn't really share how they go about it or how they get good results unless you pry it out of them.

Just as the school was focused on producing self-skilling, continuously learning students for the knowledge society, the staff were also self-skilling and self-renewing teachers who had other life and career options open to them that complemented and balanced their work.

Curriculum, teaching, and learning. Nowhere was the excitement and enthusiasm of the "formative years" more evident than in the development of Blue Mountain's approach to teaching and learning. Systems thinking, making connections between traditionally compartmentalized subject disciplines, respecting diversity, and engaging students in taking responsibility for decisions in respect of their own learning were reflected in an innovative curriculum and in classroom teaching.

Supported by open access to technology, integration, and a global outlook were central features of Blue Mountain's early curriculum model. Efforts were made to integrate English and history, math and science, and construction and community studies in team-taught settings. Teachers talked about sharing classes of 50 to 60 students: "And when you teach a class of 60 kids as opposed to a class of 25, of course, your teaching methods change." Business studies, guidance, and special needs teachers developed an integrated approach to supporting young people struggling to find a sense of direction in their lives. Technology teachers collaborated across the curriculum to design and build, with their students, a house in the local community. Using the support of the wider professional community, the school also collaborated with an expert in the local university and a district consultant to experiment with a "global camp" that took all grade 10 students out of the school for a week. As the founding principal explained, "That perspective . . . is an inclusive one. It reflects all kids, it opens up learning, it talks about the interconnectedness of everything we do."

Teachers at Blue Mountain also made extensive use of alternate assessments, especially of portfolios and exhibitions. One mathematics teacher exemplifies the kinds of innovative teaching and learning that took place routinely at the school. This teacher shared assessment targets ahead of time and emphasized performance exams in which students presented their research on mathematical problem solving. He let students undertake independent

studies (common in other subjects but not in mathematics) to encourage problem-solving approaches. He even integrated mathematics into some French classes where

I learned a lot more about how language teachers work. I learned that they involve kids with a lot more verbal skills, a lot more projects, a lot more presentations to the class . . . quite foreign to a math teacher. I used that opportunity to enlarge my teacher repertoire.

In short, learning with other teachers, across disciplines, in collaborative settings characterized Blue Mountain's learning community approach.

Structures and processes. Much of Blue Mountain's innovative energy results from applying systems thinking to the task of creating distinctive enabling structures and processes that promoted personal, interpersonal, and organizational learning throughout the school. Systems thinking, improved dialogue, deep learning, and better communication helps everyone to see the big picture of the school and be more aware of the likely consequences of their own preferences and actions on the whole school community. In the words of one of the school's pioneer teachers,

Because it's a systems school . . . it works much better for students and for staff because we're not out of the loop. We know what's going on. . . . We're aware of the whole dynamic of the building and it makes a huge difference, whereas in my old school I only knew what was happening in my department. . . . So it makes a big difference when the organization of the school is different. And this organization fits my approach to teaching far better.

These principles and processes of systems thinking are evident in the school's enabling management structure. Leadership is distributed throughout the school in a number of cross-departmental teams that include student representatives and in which the responsibility for problem solving, planning, and decision making is moved as close as possible to the people responsible for implementation. Technology is also used to make all announcements electronically, which teachers access flexibly on their laptops, freeing meetings for discussions and learning.

Key Process Teams are the driving force behind the philosophy of Blue Mountain and are also a powerful source of consensus decision making, professional development, and learning within the school. All teachers are required to be members of at least one of the Key Process Teams,³ which focus on issues like assessment and evaluation or recognition, attitude, and

morale. These meet a minimum of once a month and are chaired by middle-level leaders (heads) who report back to the Leadership Team.

The Leadership Team meets weekly and consists of the principal, vice principal, Key Process Team heads, and two student representatives. This group plays a central role in maintaining the vision and strategic direction of the school, weighing policy alternatives presented by Key Process Teams, and ensuring direction for, and consistent communication across, other teams. Loss of leadership time to repetitive administrative tasks is reduced by Management Teams, which are temporary and event driven. The leaders of each Management Team are volunteers who have an interest in, or experience of, the specific task in hand.⁴ For a maximum of 2 months, faculty and students volunteer to undertake specific tasks that emerge from Key Process Teams or organize the predictable rituals and ceremonies such as commencement, which are part of the annual life cycle of any high school.

The School Advisory Council, mentioned earlier, also operates as a team within the school. Because of its creation in advance of the school's opening, the School Advisory Council had the time and opportunity to develop a clear sense of its role in responding to the needs of a rapidly changing society, in monitoring and advising on student graduating outcomes, and in acting as a powerful lobby group in the province and the district when educational reform began to impact negatively on the vision and goals of the school.

Subject Discipline Groups meet as is customary in other secondary schools but also include the interdisciplinary Education for Global Perspective and the Teacher Advisory programs. Curriculum integration, the integrating influence of the use of technology, and the cross-faculty composition of the Key Process and Management Teams and faculty workrooms tend to encourage subject discipline groups to adopt more of a systems perspective on curriculum development and assessment than is typical in other secondary schools, which help to forge stronger cross-department and cross-curricular links.

The Student Parliament has a staff advisor, 8 elected student members, and an additional 50 student members (one from each teacher-advisory group), of whom 25 attend on a regular basis. The Parliament meets every Wednesday and considers systemwide issues first before moving to other concerns.

Finally, formal Professional Learning Communities were initiated in September 1999 at the request of the faculty to help to compensate for the loss of professional learning and development occurring in the school because of legislated reform. All faculty participate in these communities, which are deliberately mixed in age, experience, gender, and subject discipline and are chaired by one of the school's five middle-level leaders.

The caring community. In so many ways, Blue Mountain in its formative years exemplified an exciting and effective learning organization and professional learning community. However, Blue Mountain is not only a learning community but is also a caring community that builds and sustains enduring personal relationships. Without relationships, without emotional as well as intellectual connection, learning communities can degenerate into endless meetings, arid structures, and a “turnstile world of transient teamwork” (Sennett, 1998).

Beginning with nurturing genuinely reciprocal relationships with the School Council and local community before the school opened, the founding principal gradually established an ethic of care that became the emotional “glue” that held Blue Mountain together. Teachers still warmly remember an initial retreat, which was designed for “removing barriers to effective relationships in schools.” One teacher described how the founding principal’s view was that “if you are not happy as an individual, then you are not happy as a professional.”

The principle of care also extended to Teacher Advisory Groups, in which teachers initially volunteered to commit an additional 100 minutes a week to advise and support 20 students each. This initiative was designed to ensure that, in the principal’s words, “every student would have a significant adult contact in the building,” who would care for them, guide them in setting and reflecting on their goals, and give them a democratic voice in the Blue Mountain community. As one pioneer teacher commented, “I think the kids have a greater influence than I have seen in other schools. . . . I think it [is] perhaps different than other places because there is a real emphasis on relationships here.”

Blue Mountain’s second principal continued to stress the relationship theme. In keeping with the style of the founding principal, she adopted an “open door policy” and also visibly spent time interacting with students, teachers, or parents in hallways, classrooms, or the library. She and her leadership team were described by many of the staff as “wonderful,” “supportive,” “spectacular,” and “amazing” people who were “still teachers at heart.” One pioneer teacher’s views were typical.

They are very caring. When you need to approach them with personal problems, they have always kind of said, “Family comes first, you come first, let’s deal with that.” We have staff members right now who are losing their parents. And it’s always, “Take the time you need.” Whatever they can help with, they help. . . . They do a very good job of prioritizing what’s important and what’s not.

Teachers spoke freely about how the ethic of care modeled by the school's leadership had a positive influence on collegial as well as classroom relationships. Because of the care and support reciprocated between colleagues, teachers at Blue Mountain feel less guilty about taking time away from work when family sickness or personal issues create difficulties in their lives. One teacher talked about how she and a colleague split the class of a sick colleague between them, taught the students, and marked their work. "I think we are all very supportive of each other's lives in that way and so is our administration," she said. "It's always been family first. And then you can come and focus on your job." Even a very new teacher to the school remarked,

You can't work in the school and not care about your colleagues. That's just the way the school works. Those are the types of people that were hired. And so you hire people that care about you and worry about you and when you are stressed out, you talk to them, because people feel very free in expressing ideas in small forums. When your colleagues are stressed out, you are part of that.

The pressured community. Like other innovative schools, Blue Mountain has had to deal with a predictable set of internal and external pressures and problems in its evolutionary life cycle. Through systems thinking and a built-in capacity to flex and adapt to changing internal and external conditions, Blue Mountain has successfully staved off most of these predictable problems. It allayed anxieties in the community by establishing early relationships with it and involving it in developing the school's mission and its ongoing improvement efforts. Anger and envy from other schools was appeased by not raiding staff from particular schools or age groups. Every effort was made to socialize new staff into the existing culture. Problems were discussed openly. And smooth leadership succession was planned at the onset, with the incumbent assistant principal being groomed as the next principal. By distributing leadership widely, the school's success was made less dependent on charismatic heroes whose efforts could not be sustained after they were gone.

Threats to Blue Mountain's continuing survival as a postmodern learning and caring community seem to have come not from the evolutionary attrition of change, or even from the pushes and pulls of the surrounding district, but from the specific, modernistic pressure of externally mandated, standardized reform. This process began in 1995, 1 year after the school opened. A newly elected "cost-cutting" and "restructuring" provincial government centralized power, removed the ability of school districts to raise tax revenues locally, reduced overall budgets, and introduced a centralized, subject-based curriculum, provincewide testing, and a grade 10 literacy test.

In quick succession, government legislation increased teachers' time in the classroom to seven out of eight periods per day. At Blue Mountain, these further economies, when coupled with district-level mandates and local union agreements, meant that although the school's student population doubled, the middle-level leadership team was almost halved to just five people, guidance counselors were reduced from four to two full-time equivalents, and teacher-librarians were cut by half. All teachers were teaching more, covering for absent colleagues in their one "spare" period and, therefore, having to cope with little or no planning and preparation time during the school day.

The almost simultaneous arrival of these external mandates and austerity measures, as well as the negative reform climate in general, ate away at Blue Mountain's flexible capacity to adapt to change and significantly imperiled its innovative identity as a caring learning organization and professional learning community.

The loss of learning. Standardized reform has noticeably chipped away at Blue Mountain's distinctive approach to teaching and learning, especially in terms of the "attrition of the global focus," as one teacher put it. "I think we have gotten away from the global learner philosophy or culture that we were trying to foster initially," remarked another. Although loss of preparation time and key faculty have contributed to curriculum regression, the strong subject-based emphasis of the "legislated learning" has also enabled staff who never fully believed in integrated programs to question their continuance and to push for modification. Standardized reform has, in this sense, encouraged regression toward the conventional curriculum mean and inhibited organizational learning across departmental boundaries.

Ironically, although the school was featured in the Ministry's promotional videos for reform, the standardized nature of external mandates recycled Blue Mountain's innovative ideas back into the school in ways that diminished and sometimes made unimplementable the very initiatives the Ministry "borrowed" from the school in the first instance. School Councils that depend on relationships have been reimposed as formal procedures. A slimline structure of fewer departmental heads with enhanced leadership roles and a reduced teaching load has been replaced by a cost-cutting structure that reduced department heads by half and loaded them up with additional management obligations and a nearly full teaching load. Fifty-minute Teacher Advisory Groups, which fostered intensive mentoring of students in sustained relationships with volunteer teachers, are now less effective because they are now compulsory and have been reduced to 30 minutes.

Loss of resources, especially time, have also affected Blue Mountain's ability to retain its curriculum lead as a "high-tech" school. There are insuffi-

cient resources to upgrade equipment or for the key technology person in the school to adequately support technology-based learning, provide in-house technology training for teachers, or compensate for the district's own support services being downgraded in the event of breakdowns.

I have gone from having two or three support "sections" to none this year. . . . So, I was only teaching three classes [and] . . . I had less than half of the computers we now have to look after. So things break and things are not repaired or responded to at nearly the rate that they used to be. I was bragging the first year that the network was never down for the entire year. And now it's down frequently.

With little capacity to upgrade hardware or software, teachers are beginning to worry that Blue Mountain is no longer on the leading edge as a "high-tech" school.

This pattern of recycled change, coupled with reduced resources and lack of time, has wider implications for how innovative schools and pilot projects are often used (or misused) as test beds for broader system mandates. On the evidence of Blue Mountain, standardized reforms, unthinkingly applied to innovative schools, bring about regression rather than improvement in the very schools that often spawn the reforms' content.

Perhaps more seriously for a learning organization and professional learning community, work overload, brought about by loss of time and the scope of reform, has seriously affected the nature of social interaction at Blue Mountain. Teachers are working more independently rather than collaboratively as reflexive learners. As one teacher remarked, "Everybody is working right through their lunch. People pretty much stay in their workrooms for lunch and we've formed more isolated groups." Meetings are periodically cancelled because staff are tired and need time to concentrate on short-term issues. There is little time to visit other classes, to interact professionally with colleagues, or to assist new teachers. There is also no time to train new staff in the use of technology or to involve them fully in curriculum development.

Scarcity of time also constantly threatens to undermine the school's collaborative team approach to planning and decision making. It "suck[s] the creative time away from the building dramatically," in one teacher's view. Ironically, another teacher commented, collaboration and teamwork are crumbling just at the point they are the most needed. With less collaboration, fewer people know what is "going on" in the school: "There's just so much to do, it's easier to take a task on, do it yourself, get it done and then you can get at the next thing." In reflecting on these changes, teachers conveyed a sense of loss and grieving as their distinctive pioneering learning community became more fragmented:

The philosophy that we started with, and we had collaborative teams, etc., that's what we need now because that's where teachers support each other and that helps them through. Even though it's a negative environment, there's still so much creativity. But we're being fragmented and we're backing into our own little territory. This is the time when we shouldn't. We should more than ever be on collaborative teams, action research, continuous improvement process, reflecting. This is when we need to do all this. But we're not. And, in some ways, not to place blame, [but] I feel that there isn't the administrative support to do that.

Unlike more traditional high schools, the leaders at Blue Mountain have not become the focus of a blame culture. One teacher wanted to emphasize that "the leaders that we have are great. I really admire and respect them. They do an awful lot of hard work." In many ways, the school's innovative structure and tradition have made it more able than many of its counterparts to weather the reduction in the number of middle-level heads' positions. But at the same time, one veteran teacher did not "think that they can do the job they [have to] do because the job description is too big. . . . As a result of the changes, they are getting stretched so much that they can't be effective." Although the school's second principal tried valiantly, and often successfully, to sustain a caring and inclusive approach in difficult times, several teachers pointed out that in the new reform climate, the school was having to be more top down. One teacher described a key moment when courses had been cancelled without consultation.

We [used to] meet to decide as a group how best to go about a process. Well, there's been no meeting. We've just been told these classes are closed. . . . And never in my whole career has that ever happened. . . . There isn't that opportunity to share information. . . . And now it's just sort of top-down because there's only time for top-down.

The corrosion of caring. In its short history, Blue Mountain has built a strong and enviable reputation for caring among students and staff alike. But in a number of ways, the secure selves and relationships on which effective caring depends are being consistently undermined by the effects of large-scale, standardized reform. For its teachers, therefore, some of the most pernicious effects of the government's legislated mandates have been on their relationships with their students. Foremost among these was the stipulation that all teachers should teach 125 minutes each day, not including individual mentoring of or support for students. At the same time, the government mandated 30-minute rather than 50-minute-a-week Teacher Advisory Groups—a loss of a further 20 minutes contact with students. One pioneer teacher, who was always helping students and involved with their learning and their lives,

was exasperated that the mentoring of students was not allowed as part of her additional 125 minutes workload.

That's my job: to help these kids, to mentor them in situations that are unique to the individual, . . . that has changed me, because I am forced to give up a lot of my time during my spares to cover classes where I am not doing a lot of instruction. . . . Most of the time the kids just want to talk to you about something, and not to be available to them hurts me, because I only have so much time available during the day to give to these kids. And I can't do stuff because I have to cover, because I have to put in my 125 minutes. I think it challenges my integrity as a professional, which I don't like.

Some teachers were so overwhelmed that they were refusing to volunteer for coaching because they did not have the time. As one teacher said of his colleagues, "You know what? That's it. I'm doing the best I can in my classroom, but I'm not going to do the extras." In high schools, extracurricular activities are a key place, outside of subject teaching, where teachers can form good relationships with their students and get to know them well. With the loss of teachers' involvement in extracurricular work, partly because of union work-to-rule action but also because of lack of time and the increase in size of the school, relationships between students and teachers were beginning to deteriorate. The guidance teacher noted that discipline problems and referrals of students to the office were sharply on the increase and that he no longer had the time to avert major crises or to nip discipline problems in the bud.

Teachers at Blue Mountain repeatedly complained that the reforms were "not good for kids." Reform did not help teachers maintain strong relationships with their colleagues either. Because of lack of time and "mandated busy work," teachers retreated to the immediate demands of curriculum implementation in their own classrooms and away from staff-room conversation and collaborative teamwork in general. As one staff member put it,

I just see many teachers here as being simply individuals. . . . [It used to be] like a family. And I just don't see it that way now because there have been too many changes. . . . I see the school as being a group of individuals all with different agendas.

The debts of time that teachers were made to pay to the government also limited the support teachers could provide for new faculty. Teachers at Blue Mountain placed a high value on getting to know and offering to help teachers who were new to the school. In highly innovative schools, paying attention to supporting and socializing new teachers into the school, its culture and mission, is essential for making progress sustainable. But since the impact of standards-based, legislated reform, there was no time to induct new faculty

into the Blue Mountain culture: “We don’t have the in-service for them. We just assume that here’s somebody new, life goes on, and we absorb them and then wonder why there is some difficulty.”

Mandated reform not only strained the connections and communications among teachers, it began to drive wedges between them. Blue Mountain was first seriously affected by provincewide economies when teachers with 10 years’ experience or less were laid off and replaced by teachers with greater seniority who were transferred from other schools in the district with shrinking student populations. These teachers were often unfamiliar with, and sometimes unsympathetic to, the school’s mission. As Blue Mountain’s first two principals both related, this created some “real challenges” in integrating staff who were not only new to the school but also angry and disaffected with their transfer.

The pressures of reform sometimes also set teachers against one another at the very time that they most needed mutual support, creating great emotional turmoil among teachers who cared for their colleagues but were resentful of having to work harder and cover for the classes of those who were sick. As one recently hired teacher explained,

Now, this has done a couple of things . . . for me personally: (a) it makes me resent the people that are away; (b) I feel guilty for resenting them because they are sick. But you resent people who are constantly doing PD stuff, which is ultimately beneficial to you, you resent that and that bothers me; (c) it also bothers me that if I am away, I can’t have a lesson plan that runs through the babysitting. You have two people in there, and they are not area specialists, like a substitute would be. So you can’t leave a lesson plan; you have to leave an independent module.

Like their colleagues elsewhere, many teachers at Blue Mountain also felt that the reforms and the derogatory tone in which politicians and some of the media described teachers and their work affected their motivation and morale (Hargreaves et al., 2000). Some talked about how the fun and creativity had gone out of their work; about feeling angry, resentful, unappreciated, and not valued. Endless negative media characterizations, along with policies that seemed to promote little learning or growth for teachers, made teachers feel cynical and disillusioned. As one pioneer teacher said, “I’m thinking, no PD, 8 Heads to 5, extra 125 minutes! Where is the positive growth in any of that?” Teachers also felt that they were losing their resilience: “How often can you be emotionally hurt and pull yourself back together again? . . . What the heck, I am not trying to bother next time! We may just be on the edge of that!” One teacher felt the profession’s public image had sunk so low, “I hate it when I have to confess my occupation to strangers.” As the second principal ac-

knowledge, in somewhat understated terms, the school was “in a little bit of dip.” At the request of her staff, she had therefore designated one of the Key Process Teams as RAM (Recognition, Attitude, Morale) because “we have to work on morale and attitude for teachers as well.”

SUMMARY

Lord Byron and Durant represent different responses to the three forces of change that characteristically threaten the sustainability of innovative schools. Lord Byron embodies the more classic trajectory that has been documented in the change literature (Fink, 2000). Here, enthusiasm and excitement among creative stars who were drawn to the school’s mission and its charismatic principal sowed the seeds of professional isolation from and perceived superiority toward other schools and the community, which would be the school’s undoing when it encountered adversity in years to come. This adversity included increases in size, which strained the staff’s feelings of closeness and intimacy and weakened the school’s culture when new “settler” teachers were not socialized into the values and priorities of the pioneers. Subsequent decreases in size led to loss of cherished programs. Leadership successions could not routinize the charisma of the founding principal, district support was redirected elsewhere, and increasing centralization and standardization of the educational reform agenda constantly undermined the school’s creativity and autonomy and its capacity to be different.

Durant, in many ways, shared a similar early life history to that of Lord Byron. The predictable attrition of change created difficulties for the school as successive waves of pioneer faculty moved elsewhere for promotion and as the student body fluctuated in size to reflect changing urban demographics. The school was inward looking and not well connected to either the local professional community or the wider public at large. Its reputation as a loose, free school that catered to White dropouts and/or brilliant misfits did not endear the school to Black parents, district professionals, local politicians, or the media. The school also struggled throughout its history with maintaining internal control of a unique student-centered philosophy and program, as the encroaching and enervating effects of standardized reform policies and district-level pressures led to Durant gradually losing control of its curriculum and unique identity.

Yet Durant also exemplifies some resilient features that have enabled it to withstand the effects of centralization and standardization for longer. Leadership has been more stable and the succession process less frequent and volatile. The school has stayed smaller and, in an intimate community, has found

the retention of its founding philosophy and the renewal of its culture less challenging. Instead of Byron's increasingly uncomprehending professional community, Durant's teachers were able to engage over a much longer term in all aspects of the school's affairs, from governance to curriculum and teaching. Durant's parents are advocates, not skeptics. And when Durant is under pressure, it is still able to reach out beyond its own boundaries in an activist way and to network with other similar schools as a source of support. As Oakes and her colleagues observe, such political activism and its importance in sustaining innovation is a missing ingredient in the more technocratic and purportedly value-free literature of educational change (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000). Yet, by the beginning of this century, even this very small school's capacity for networking and activism was failing to protect it against the overwhelming influences of standardized reform.

Blue Mountain's self-conscious identity as a learning organization and caring community evidenced more resilience in withstanding the usual internal and external difficulties experienced by innovative schools—by involving the community early, by planning ahead for two sets of leadership succession in 8 years, and by building process teams and multiple professional communities of learning and support into the school's administrative structures and self-skilling decision-making processes.

Although grieving how the school is changing and losing its "small-town" feeling, a surprising number of teachers still make positive statements about Blue Mountain: "It is a good place to be. It's where you want to go when you wake up." One of the more recent teachers at Blue Mountain describes the school as a utopia: "Everybody's happy, everybody's positive. . . . I never want to leave. Blue Mountain is a home." She recounted the example of coming back from a training session shared with other schools and commented,

We all came back and said, "Thank God we're home." And it's like that. You feel like you're home. . . . It's a place where you come and live and the kids live and learning lives and people live, and we interact and we care for each other and it's really great.

However, this positive professional culture and the stability of Blue Mountain as a social system is slowly being changed by a critical mass of external forces. Commitment is proving difficult to maintain as internal turbulence created by loss of time, loss of leadership and pioneer faculty,⁵ recycled change, reduced support, and a dispiriting climate of shame and blame have taken the edge off Blue Mountain's most exciting programs, hindered the maintenance of its technological capacity, undermined relationships among teachers and between teachers and students, and put dents in the collabora-

tion and teamwork that have been the backbone of the school as a professional learning community. As one pioneer teacher at Blue Mountain put it, "I think we're on a track to mediocrity, whereas we were on a track to stardom before."

Will Blue Mountain be able to resist the pressures for standardization and conformity to which Lord Byron finally succumbed and which, like Durant, could well make the school much the same as others in the district and province? Will its innovative structures and processes continue to provide the flexibility, adaptability, and resilience needed to creatively colonize external mandates, as we found at the very small Durant alternative school? Will it be possible to maintain sufficient social interaction and the resultant personal and interpersonal learning needed to sustain the emotional commitment of the faculty to the founding vision of the now much bigger school, and hence maintain the unique culture of this self-skilling learning organization that prepares students to live and work in a knowledge society?

Our evidence suggests that this is already difficult and will be increasingly difficult to do. Blue Mountain's future success as a learning organization depends on its capacity to secure sufficient "learning space" from reform pressure to find the time and latitude to learn, flex, adapt, and regroup, when even the availability of time has been standardized by policy mandate. But rather than asking whether "knowledge society" schools like Blue Mountain can eke out an abbreviated existence in the face of standardized reform, it is perhaps more important to challenge the inflexibility of standardized reform movements, given the demonstrable damage they inflict on professional learning communities and their sustainability.

CONCLUSION

Schools as learning organizations and professional learning communities seem to have the capacity to offset two of the three change forces that threaten the sustainability of innovative efforts. They can learn how to halt the evolutionary attrition of change by renewing their teacher cultures, distributing leadership, and planning for leadership succession. They can learn to manage their "foreign relations" (Sarason, 1972) with the community, other schools, and the district by curbing their arrogance, involving the community in decision making, and resisting the temptation to ask for too many favors from the district. But, judging by all three cases of innovative schools explored in this article, the standardized reform agenda is actively undermining the efforts and successes of those few, truly creative "knowledge society" schools, and their teachers, that currently exist.

The paradox of learning organizations and communities in education is that they are being advocated most strongly just at the point when standardized reform movements legislate the content and micromanage the process of learning to such a degree that there is little scope for teachers to learn in what little time is left over. Professional learning communities are postmodern organizational forms struggling to survive in a modernistic, micromanaged, and politicized educational world. Where standardized reform practices continue to tighten their grip, as is now the case in North America, the future for schools as learning organizations and professional learning communities that will develop the creativity and flexibility needed in the new knowledge economy does not look promising.

Learning organizations like Blue Mountain can survive and subvert the pressures of standardization for a while, living off past planning or dredging up their last reserves of energy in their efforts to endure. But the hope that sheer acts of will can enable learning organizations to persist in the face of overwhelming odds is an empty one. The future of the learning society will depend not merely on our capacity to make those schools that are learning organizations and professional learning communities more resilient to standardization. It will also depend on the capacity of nations and their governments to create environments in which learning organizations and professional learning communities can flourish by relaxing their regimes of standardization. England, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Singapore are already signing on to the knowledge economy by moving in this direction, as is the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the World Bank.⁶ There is no rational reason why North Americans cannot do the same.

NOTES

1. This project was funded by Spencer Foundation Grant 199800214.
2. Only Cohort 3 teachers and administrators were interviewed at Blue Mountain (the school opened in 1994). The founding principal, vice principal, and 10 of the 12 teachers that were interviewed all had experience in other schools.
3. Although membership of Key Process Teams is required, teachers choose teams based on interest and/or expertise. No explicit attempt is made to balance teams according to subject discipline.
4. Although membership is not mandatory, there is a professional expectation from the administration that faculty volunteer to be members of Management Teams.
5. Of the original 32 pioneer faculty who opened Blue Mountain in 1994, 10 were transferred from the school in the first 2 years. Five have returned by choice as the school has grown. The school is now being led by its third principal and third vice principal in 8 years. Of our original interview sample of 12 teachers, a number have adopted various manifestations of disengagement.

One has retired, 1 has changed schools, 1 has left to become a director of a dot com start-up company, and 1 is on sabbatical leave (and will probably not return because of growing business interests). Most of the remainder are actively working on or developing alternative careers.

6. See Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2001) and chapters 6 and 7 in Hargreaves (2003) for examples of ways in which various countries are beginning to relax their regimes of standardization and explicitly embrace knowledge society principles. In particular, there is England, where the notions of creating the incentive of more “earned autonomy” and freedom for schools (Department for Education and Skills, 2001) and of differentiated levels of intervention in school improvement (Fullan & Earl, 2002), have entered the public policy arena.

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Corrie Giles, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in educational leadership and policy in the Graduate School of Education, University at Buffalo, State University of New York. His current research areas are leadership in challenging urban contexts and the impact of standardized reform on schools and school systems.

Andy Hargreaves, Ph.D., is the Thomas More Brennan Chair in Education at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College and former director of the International Center for Educational Change at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. His most recent book is Teaching in the Knowledge Society: Education in the Age of Insecurity (Teachers College Press, 2003).