This issue of *Education Canada* portrays an amazing variety of good ideas in education. When I was first approached to write this article, I expected that the issue would be a collection of innovative practices in elementary and secondary schools across the country. What we have, however, is much richer. The articles outline an impressive range of “best practice” in Canadian schools, school districts, colleges and universities. But beyond these glimpses into various educational organizations, we have a chance to hear about partnerships and outreach activities, some of which extend our thinking about what education is and could be. Although I focus on schools, it is important to remember that education extends well beyond these conventional settings.
The articles in this issue give us close-up views of many different initiatives, each generating enthusiasm and commitment, many making an impact. My perspective is somewhat different in that I am trying to stand back - to look at the broader landscape of school improvement and to add a cautionary note.

In recent years, schools have been saturated with changes. Many of these are a result of external forces such as district directives, provincial policy shifts, and funding cuts. Other changes come about because teachers and principals identify needs and then develop programs and initiatives to address such needs. Regardless of how change has come about, schools have not been standing still.

For many years, attempts to introduce innovations into classrooms and schools tended to emphasize the product or practice that was being advocated (e.g. new approaches to math or open classrooms). The assumption was that everyone should adopt this great new approach. Disappointment has inevitably followed. In some cases, the innovation was poorly understood and never really implemented. In other cases, the innovation created problems because it fit poorly with the way most schools operated. Open classrooms, for instance, were not popular with teachers accustomed to organizing their classrooms with little interference or distraction from others. In still other cases, innovations were adopted, but did not last. Perhaps the novelty wore off or an innovation was supplemented by yet another new idea. Some innovations continued to be seen as interesting but isolated projects (peer coaching, team teaching), rarely becoming part of the organizational fabric of schools.

Fortunately, much has been learned over the last two decades about education reform and the management of change. Much has also been learned about which educational practices have the best chance of significantly improving student outcomes. In this brief article, I will look at two distinct but complementary approaches to improving the likelihood that new ideas will make a sustained difference in schools. First, I will summarize some conclusions about which practices are worth adopting, drawing mainly from the research on effective schools. Second, I will look more broadly at schools as organizations - beyond choosing and implementing “good ideas,” what is required for schools to sustain the improvements they work so hard to put in place?

Choosing the “right innovations”

As part of ongoing efforts to improve student learning and to help schools provide supportive environments for students and staff, researchers have tried to identify practices that work well. The “effective schools” research, for instance, has led to hundreds of such practices - far more than any school or school district could keep track of, let alone implement. One list of the effective schooling attributes that are seen as most crucial focuses on instruction and context. Instructional attributes include focused instruction, effective questioning, and feedback and reinforcement. Contextual attributes refer to such factors as strong administrative leadership, safe and orderly schools, monitoring of student progress and parent/community involvement. None of these sound new or surprising to educators or to the public, although it is not always clear how schools might actually move from “less effective” to “more effective.” Practices identified through the effective schools research may sound unexciting to educators, partly because they rein-

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Although these may not be directly linked to student learning, they address the wider context to provide better opportunities for all children.

It is clear from this brief summary that there is no shortage of good ideas and excellent programs. At the same time, however, research on outcomes has been somewhat disappointing; there seem to be few innovations that can be relied upon to consistently improve student learning in all situations. Educators often show great commitment in developing programs and investing energy to ensure that student needs are met. But, if “promising practices” are to make a difference in student learning, more is required.

**What else has to happen?**

Increasingly, educators and researchers are coming to a consensus: improvement in student learning is fostered and sustained by a confluence of favourable conditions in the school. In addition to individual teacher skill and knowledge, successful schools are characterized by professional community and program coherence. Professional community should not be confused with high morale or collegiality, desirable as those are. A school with strong professional community focuses on student learning with clear shared goals, collective responsibility, ongoing problem-solving, and opportunities for staff to influence school policies and activities. Program coherence means that school programs and activities fit together, are sustained over time, and are perceived by staff to support agreed-upon school priorities.

According to Michael Fullan, the main enemies of successful reform are “overload and extreme fragmentation.” The phrase “Christmas tree schools” refers to schools that showcase a multitude of programs and initiatives, some of which may be operating at cross-purposes. Given the “sea of excessive, inconsistent, relentless demands” surrounding schools, it is not difficult to understand how they become overloaded with well-intended but unconnected activities.

While remaining alert to worthwhile new initiatives, schools must be selective; there is no prize for taking on the greatest number of innovations. Schools do better to focus on a few key priorities, sustained over a number of years. Such key priorities can guide choices about new initiatives and can help overcome fragmentation by connecting activities across the school. Again, the touchstone for all innovations would be the expected link to improved student learning.

**Conclusion**

Education seems to be in a constant state of flux, motivated both by external pressures and by internal changes. Educators do well to be proactive in the face of such pressures, that is, to take the initiative in selecting and developing solutions to the problems they see in their schools. However, it is important to remember that, in and of themselves, promising practices are unlikely to make much sustained impact. Good practice must be integrated in a whole school effort to build coherence and overcome fragmentation. In schools with the capacity to do this, and with a constant focus on student learning, promising practices can lead to sustained success.

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6 Newmann and Wehlage.
9 Bryk.
10 Fullan.

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