

You are free to reproduce, distribute and transmit this article, provided you attribute the author(s), Education Canada Vol. 47 (3), and a link to the Canadian Education Association (www.cea-ace.ca) 2010. You may not use this work for commercial purposes. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. Publication ISSN 0013-1253.



THE LONG AND SHORT OF

THE TWO PROTAGONISTS FORMED ONE OF THE MOST improbable movie partnerships ever. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito stood side by side – one of them vertiginously tall, the other scarcely more than a midget. Twins! This movie and its leading actors extracted comedic capital from an abiding tension and a popular yet unspoken belief that long things and short things shouldn't really go together! The same is true in educational and organizational change. Long-term and short-term change strategies are typically depicted as opponents, as competing rather than complementary principles of improvement and change. This article sets out compelling evidence to the contrary.

THE TYRANNY OF THE SHORT

But let's begin plainly. A lot of short-termism is indeed suspect. During the Harris year in Ontario, I collected and witnessed the appalling evidence of hasty implementation, rushed reform and imposed, short-term literacy targets and testing in Grade 10.¹ Teachers suffered from what business writer Abrahamson calls initiative overload.² In a brief period when more legislation was passed on educational reform than in the province's entire history,³ teachers became the victims of change-related chaos. They sometimes had just days to master the frantically imposed curriculum. This, along with loss of preparation time, meant they had less time to build relationships with their students, to return their work to them promptly or to meet with their colleagues to reflect and to plan.

A high stakes literacy test that was linked to graduation and whose results were made public drove schools towards cynical solutions – narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test and concentrating excessive attention on coaching children just below the cut off point. In the United States and England, the effects of these standardized testing regimes were even worse – schools rejected children who might bring the scores down, new entrants were given no attention if their results didn't count that year, or test items were made progressively easier to fabricate political appearances of improvement. Cheating spread like wildfire. Corruption was rife.⁴

While the Harris years exhibit the extremes of short-term thinking, preoccupation with the short-term is not at all new. Writing in *Sustainable Leadership*, Dean Fink and I examined the experiences of educational change over thirty years in eight innovative and traditional US and Canadian secondary schools.⁵ Though politicians and administrators are eager to celebrate the snapshot successes of pilot projects, new technologies or innovative schools, our historical evidence is that in the longer view, most change victories are fleeting and their celebration is premature. Beacons of innovation usually fade once their founding leaders move on and focus shifts elsewhere. The early promise of pilot projects rarely spreads to the rest of the system, which is funded to nowhere near the same degree. Waves of government initiatives and reforms wash over world-weary schools that simply wait for the tides of change to recede. And charismatic leaders who heroically turn their schools around typically don't stay long enough to ensure that they stay turned around beyond one or two years.

OUR HISTORICAL EVIDENCE IS THAT IN THE LONGER VIEW, MOST CHANGE VICTORIES ARE FLEETING AND THEIR CELEBRATION IS PREMATURE.

EN BREF En matière d'amélioration des écoles, le présent et l'avenir sont importants. Les réformes précipitées qui génèrent une multitude d'initiatives imposées par les autorités n'entreront guère dans les salles de classe. Il existe de meilleures voies, comme en témoigne la Finlande. Commencer par l'apprentissage, puis engager et impliquer les enseignants en améliorant leurs méthodes pédagogiques, investir dans le leadership qui construit des collectivités d'apprentissage très performantes, ainsi qu'appuyer les réseaux scolaires qui optimisent l'amélioration et l'apprentissage collectifs – ces principes constituent une façon plus pratique, plus durable, plus ouverte et plus responsable de développer l'apprentissage et l'enseignement à court comme à long terme. La réforme de l'éducation au Canada ne doit pas se limiter à combler des écarts chiffrés au moyen de résultats faciles à mesurer, elle doit chercher à favoriser et à enrichir l'apprentissage de tous les élèves et tous les aspects de chaque élève, selon une vision éducative et sociale inspirée et inclusive de ce que le pays représente aujourd'hui et de ce qu'il doit aspirer à devenir demain.

EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

So there's good reason to be critical of those who exert pressure for short-term results. Indeed, when Michael Fullan insisted that in the face of the new political "reality", which necessitated demonstrating quick progress within one election term, there was "no excuse for failing to design and implement strategies that get short-term results",⁶ Dean Fink and I took him and the province of Ontario to task for it.⁷ Politically imposed short-term achievement targets, we argued, eventually doomed schools and systems into becoming devious little Enrons of educational change that would do anything to get the numbers right.

Even now, in seemingly optimistic reform environments like Ontario and British Columbia, the well intentioned efforts to lift lagging student achievement and provincial achievement results – largely in the basics of literacy, numeracy and exam performance, one student at a time – run the risk of emphasizing only the performance numbers, of skewing the curriculum towards testable achievement, and of launching endless initiatives and interventions from the top. While the Deputy Ministers and government advisors of these and other provinces also talk in welcome tones about developing greater capacity within their systems, it's important to grasp that human capacity, like water capacity, is enlarged not only by *increasing* the *supply* of training, materials and resources, but also by *reducing demand* of unnecessary and excessive external initiatives.⁸

THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE LONG

Against the short-termism that is rife in the educational reform regimes of the Anglo-Saxon countries, Dean Fink and I have argued for a less wasteful and impatient approach that brings about more sustainable improvement instead.

- *Putting learning first*, before achievement and testing – rather than equating achievement with tested attainment in literacy and math in which Canada, ironically, already excels.
- *Distributing leadership widely and wisely* so improvement becomes a shared professional responsibility rather than the object of top-down government control.
- *Ensuring improvement lasts* beyond the tenure of one school leader or the government of the day's temporary election agenda.
- *Encouraging schools to work together*, helping rather than competing against each other in the quest to raise achievement standards.
- *Connecting future changes to past achievements* of which experienced educators can be proud, rather than rushing through short-term reforms that dismiss or demean the past, so governments can claim control of the future.

LET'S SEE THESE PRINCIPLES IN ACTION.

Recently I conducted an investigation for OECD, with Beatriz Pont and Gabor Halasz, that examined the relationship between leadership and school improvement in one of the world's highest performing nations economically and educationally – Finland.



**FINNISH SCHOOLS ARE CHARACTERIZED BY AN UNCANNY CALMNESS,
TEACHERS EXERCISE THEIR PALPABLE SENSE OF PROFESSIONAL AND
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THEIR EFFORTS TO CARE ESPECIALLY
FOR CHILDREN AT THE BOTTOM, SO AS TO LIFT THEM TO THE LEVEL
OF THE REST.**



In less than half a century, Finland has transformed itself from a rural backwater into a high-tech economic powerhouse, through its educational system. At all levels, Finns are driven by a common social vision that connects a creative and prosperous future – as epitomized by the Nokia telecommunications company whose operations and suppliers account for about 40% of the country's GDP⁹ – to the people's sense of themselves as having a creative history and social identity. One of the schools we visited was just two miles from the home of Finland's iconic composer Sibelius. And the visual, creative and performing arts are an integral part of children's education and lifelong learning all through and even beyond their secondary school experience.

Technological creativity and competitiveness, therefore, do not break Finns from their past but connect them to it in a unitary narrative of lifelong learning and societal development. All this occurs within a strong and inclusive welfare state that supports and *steers* but does not micro-manage the educational system and the economy. A strong public system provides education free of charge as a universal right all the way through school and higher education – including all necessary resources, equipment, musi-

cal instruments and free school meals for everyone. Science and technology are high priorities, though not at the expense of artistic creativity or social responsibility.

All this educational and economic integration occurs within a society that values children, education and social welfare, that has high regard for education and educators as servants of the public good, that ranks teaching as the most desired occupation of high school graduates, and that is therefore able to make entry into teaching demanding and highly competitive.¹⁰

Within this generally understood social vision, the state steers but does not prescribe in detail the national curriculum – with trusted teams of highly qualified teachers writing much of the curriculum together at the level of the municipality, in ways that adjust to the students they know best. In schools characterized by an uncanny calmness, teachers exercise their palpable sense of professional and social responsibility in their efforts to care especially for children at the bottom, so as to lift them to the level of the rest. This is achieved not by endless initiatives, targeted interventions or constant crunching of numbers, but by quiet, professional *cooperation* (a favourite Finnish word) among all the teachers involved.

Principals in Finland are required by law to have been teachers themselves and most continue to be engaged in classroom teaching for at least two or three hours per week. When asked how they could still teach as well as lead in their high performing system, one said that, "unlike the Anglo-Saxon countries, we do not have to spend our time responding to long lists of government initiatives that come from the top." The Finnish system has almost no testing, for instance, and no spate of government-driven interventions. From Michael Fullan's administrative and political perspective, the teachers' unions are the chief "distractors" that have to be dealt with in reform efforts.¹¹ But from the Finns' perspective of social vision and professional responsibility, top heavy government can be the biggest distractor of all.

Building a future by wedding it to the past; fostering strong connections between education and economic development without sacrifice to culture and creativity; promoting a broad and enriching curriculum rather than obsessing about tested literacy and maths; raising standards by lifting the many rather than pushing a privileged few; connecting private prosperity to the public good; developing a highly qualified profession that brings about improvement through commitment, trust, cooperation and responsibility; embedding and embodying leadership for learning into almost every principal's weekly activity; and then emphasising principles of professional and community-based rather than merely political and administrative accountability – these are interconnected principles of



sustainable success that Finland has chosen over the dominant Anglo-Saxon strategies of government-driven, initiative-heavy, short-term reform that still prevail in many parts of Canada.

LOST IN THE LONG TERM

But not all that is long term is also sustainable. Five-year school improvement plans have little or no value when overburdened school districts barely look at or provide feedback on them. In any case, most plans are usually redundant within a year or two because of unanticipated changes in government policy, community demographics or teacher turnover. Similarly, principals' visions can inspire new change efforts, but those efforts rarely outlast the leader's often premature departure.

In his inspirational series of Massey Lectures, Stephen Lewis rightly condemns the United Nations for setting distant Millennium goals that specify no short-term targets for monitoring progress along the way.¹² Similarly in the environmental sphere, those who have or who serve corporate power only want to impose short-term targets on others – they do not want environmental emission targets applied to them! So instead of bringing about sustainability, attention that is directed only towards the long term can be an avoidance of responsibility. Procrastination, filibustering, indifference and dithering – these are the evasions of moral purpose that find just as easy a refuge in the luxury of the long-term as do the more honourable intentions to foster deep and lasting improvement.

SPURRED ON BY THE SHORT

"In the long term", said John Maynard Keynes, "we're all dead." So, better perhaps to concentrate on what makes a difference right now. The students in front of you – especially those who are most at risk – cannot be sacrificed to improvements that will only bear fruit far into the future. Tomorrow is too late for them. So short-term change efforts aren't always cynical. Sometimes, it's right here, right now that the most needy students deserve our strongest support.

Short-term gains can also provide "quick wins" for teachers and others that demonstrate the achievability of success and build confidence to invest in more difficult longer-term changes. David Hopkins argues that short-term "changes to the school environment, attendance and uniform can result in tangible gains" that lift morale.¹³ Similarly, community activists know that when disempowered groups such as ethnic minority parents agitate for change, concrete early victories demonstrate that their investments of energy can indeed get results.¹⁴

One of the very first advocates of "quick wins," John Kotter, argued that short-term measurable improvements are

valuable because they demonstrate that sacrifices are worth it. They provide opportunities for celebration, relaxation and regrouping; they test long-term visions against immediate realities; they take the wind out of the sails of cynics and resisters; they increase credibility among supervisors and stakeholders; and they build vital momentum at times when energy might otherwise start to sag.¹⁵

The research on happiness backs this up. Jonathan Haidt points out that one of the things that makes us happy is achieving our purposes. But if we focus all our efforts on one distant goal and the pleasure (or relief) we will feel when we attain it, the total amount of happiness gained in relation to the time taken to attain it is hardly worth it. Our happiness quotient is too low. But if, in undertaking a long hike, say, we also derive pleasure from reaching intermediate milestones or horizons along the way, our overall happiness quotient is higher, and we are more likely to persevere in our longer-term quests.¹⁶

CONNECTING THE LONG AND THE SHORT

So there are good sides and bad sides to both long term *and* short term action and thinking. The different possibilities and their implications are represented below.

| Short | Long | Short | Long |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|---|--|
| – cynical – opportunistic | – evasive – unaccountable | – government-imposed short-term achievement targets | – UN Millenium Goals |
| + urgent + confidence-boosting | + enduring + sustainable | + shared targets + quick "wins" | + authentic transformations in practices and beliefs |

Long-term improvement efforts can be authentic and sustainable, or evasive, inefficient and unaccountable. Short-term strategies can be practical and motivating, making a difference to students right now, or cynical and opportunistic responses that prop up dubious political agendas. Michael Fullan and I are therefore both wrong and both right. The challenge is not to choose between rewards *today* and *tomorrow*. It is to detect and select the good against the bad versions of each, and then to create better synergy between the two.

Business writer John Kotter grasps this when he stresses that "quick wins" must be "clearly related to the change effort".

The whole point is not to maximize short-term results at the expense of the future. The point is to make sure that visible results lend sufficient credibility to the (long-term) transformation effort.¹⁷

LONG-TERM IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS CAN BE AUTHENTIC AND SUSTAINABLE, OR EVASIVE, INEFFICIENT AND UNACCOUNTABLE. SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES CAN BE PRACTICAL AND MOTIVATING, OR CYNICAL AND OPPORTUNISTIC.



My colleague Dennis Shirley and I have evaluated a substantial school improvement project in England (Raising Achievement, Transforming Learning) that explicitly tries to develop and connect short-term and long-term strategies for raising achievement and transforming learning in just this way.¹⁸ Two thirds of these 300 schools that had experienced a dip in performance measurably improved within one to two years at double the rate of the national average.

The RATL project networks its schools together, provides them with technical assistance on how to interpret and learn from achievement data, connects them to mentor schools and supplies each school with a discretionary budget of £9000 per year. In this high trust, high support system of schools working with schools, the centre of the improvement effort is a menu of short-term, medium-term and long-term strategies for change.

The project's spectacular success has been with the short-term strategies. Instead of living under threat of intervention and inspection in a target-driven culture of

fear, principals and teachers find the experience of visiting each other's schools and sharing strategies that make an immediate difference exhilarating and empowering.

In this energizing culture of mutual learning and collaboration, the information and ideas that educators acquire is practical and immediately useable, providing "experience and good practice in other places that we can bring back and customize." One principal described how at one conference:

The Assistant Head and I went together and we came away really, really enthusiastic because there were lots of practical hints, practical tips, things that if you took just one of them wasn't going to make a big difference, but if you pick and choose several and say, 'how can I apply that to my school?' that was the way that we felt we could move.

Schools mentioned all kinds of strategies that had made a difference: providing lists of "top tips" and study skills; e-mentoring that connects students across schools; paying past students to mentor existing ones; using university professors to disclose inside knowledge about successful

“ ”
I think all of us
 as volunteers came in acknowledging that, yes, we may have skills, but we're also going to learn a lot.

— Michele Hillier, Sri Lanka

www.vsocan.org **1.888.876.2911**
 Please visit our website. **VSOCAN** Sharing skills Changing lives **inquiry@vsocan.org**

Would you make THE JOURNEY?

With partners in Africa, Asia and the South Pacific, VSO Canada places skilled volunteers overseas in more than 60 occupations, and provides a comprehensive training and support package.

VSO IS RECRUITING!

We may have a life-changing opportunity for you in your field.

EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

Ken and Janet Adams taught at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana

SCIENCE TEACHERS

Susan Harnett builds the science knowledge of teachers in training in Malawi

EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS

Annemiek Miller works with teachers and parents to help rebuild Rwanda's education system

student work; organizing additional revision sessions after school, on Saturdays, during school holidays, in breakfast clubs, or immediately before examinations; collecting student's mobile phone numbers to track them down on exam day; offering rewards, such as free prom tickets to students who meet their targets; and bringing in motivational speakers for vulnerable groups such as Grade 11 boys.

The project therefore achieved superb success with short-term change. However, even though it was actually designed to run across three time-spans, what even it could not yet do was connect these short-term successes to longer-term transformations in teaching and learning. Most schools were so attracted, even addicted, to the quick lifts their short-term efforts gave to their performance numbers, they didn't really dedicate time or energy to the more challenging and soul-searching longer-term struggles to question and alter their teaching, or give more voice to the students they taught. Provincial efforts to raise achievement by focusing on the performance numbers of, and designing interventions for, each individual child run the very same risk of being driven too much by the numbers in constant quests for short-term gains.

STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS

The project's schools are aware of needing to work in all time frames, however, and we are helping them to do so. So, how *do* you connect the short term and the long term? How *do* you deal with today *and* tomorrow? In their recent business book, *The Three Tensions*, Dodd and Favaro reveal that companies that concentrate excessively on their quarterly returns do less well than those that also take the long view.¹⁹ Applying and adding to their very useful strategies for dealing with the long and the short of things, here are ten closing strategic implications for bringing together what has for too long been kept apart:

- **Establish correct valuation** – small companies shouldn't compare themselves unrealistically with big ones, and schools should mainly have their performance compared with ones that deal with similar demographics and challenges.
- **Develop sustainable growth rates** – neither too fast (risking early burnout), nor too slow. Don't always try to get the biggest possible increase right now. It will only cost you later. Like cross-country skiing, school improvement needs the *right* amount of energy at the *right* time.
- **Be ethically consistent** – express your long-term principles in *how* you deliver short-term growth, by respecting people, building trust, and keeping focused on learning as well as achievement results.
- **Balance investments** – allocating equal resources to long-term *as well as* short-term objectives.
- **Prioritize planning** – so that long-term considerations *precede* short-term ones on meeting agendas, and so there are overlapping teams for both long *and* short-term improvement efforts.
- **Broaden the language and vision** – beyond management, monitoring and mentoring of easily tested attainment, to creating different, higher quality teaching and learning that engages all students and makes inspirational connections with their lives.

IO is... a personal workspace for teachers

Intelligence Online makes it easy to create amazing learning experiences that will engage and motivate your students every day.

IO is proven to:

- ENGAGE STUDENTS
- PROMOTE ACADEMIC RIGOR
- LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY
- IMPROVE STUDENT PERFORMANCE

"I think the quality of the student work produced speaks volumes about the effectiveness of such a design process. I can't imagine designing projects any other way."

Janne - High School Teacher



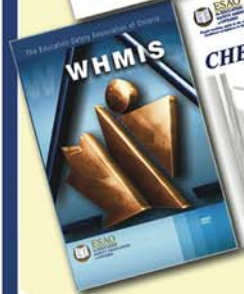
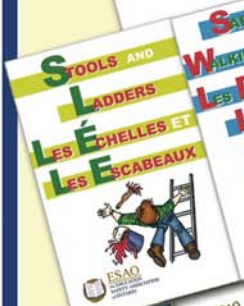
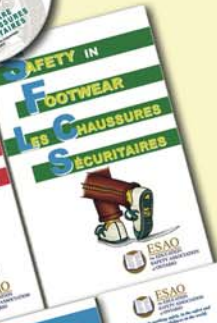
intelligence online
www.iomembership.com





ESAO
The EDUCATION
SAFETY ASSOCIATION
of ONTARIO

Now Available on DVD



New Winter
Driving
CD-ROM



www.esao.on.ca or 416-250-8005
toll free 1-877-732-3726

- **Create intermediate indicators** – of moving towards long-term objectives (like levels of student engagement or changes in teachers' beliefs) to motivate and monitor progress along the way.
- **Commit to shared targets** – to push your own and others' performance instead of running around complying with arbitrary targets imposed by others.
- **Reduce initiativitis** – so schools can spend more time pursuing their own agenda and less time reacting to others!
- **Build from the bottom; steer from the top** – beginning with *deeper and broad learning* (not easily tested literacy); then *high quality teaching* (retaining the discretion that also retains the best in the profession); then developing schools as *strong professional communities* where teachers work together for improvement; and investing in the development of *outstanding leadership* that also networks schools with each other.

These principles are very different from starting with a guiding government coalition that treats unions as distractors and directs initiatives at school districts, which in turn drop more demands on to principals who become overly obsessed with short-term performance numbers in the basics of tested literacy and math and inspire little enrichment and transformation of learning in any deeper sense.

CONCLUSION

The long and short of school improvement is that today and tomorrow both matter. More and more rushed reforms – however well intentioned – that produce multitudes of initiatives cascading down from the Minister's office, to the district superintendent and then to principals and their schools, will never get beyond the classroom door, and – except in the most basic and easily tested skill areas – to the teachers who ultimately control the destiny of children and their learning for today and tomorrow. There has to be, and already are, better paths to follow. Starting with learning, then managing up to engage and involve teachers in improving their teaching, investing in the leadership that builds high performing learning communities and supporting school networks that maximize learning and improving together – these principles do not have the overconfident authority of politically driven, top-down reform. But do they set out a more practical and sustainable, as well as trusting and responsible, way to develop learning and teaching that matter and that last within a nation that has a confident social vision about what it is and where it is going, beyond economic performance and achievement results? Educational reform in Canada should not just be about narrowing numerical gaps in easily measurable outcomes, but should be about striving to benefit and enrich the learning of all students and all aspects of every student in an inspired and inclusive social and educational vision of what the country still stands for today and must aspire to become tomorrow. |

ANDY HARGREAVES is the Thomas More Brennan Chair in Education in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. Before this he was founder and co-director of the International Centre for Educational Change at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto). His doctorate is from Leeds in England where he also taught in several universities. His most recent book is *Sustainable Leadership*, co-authored with Dean Fink (JosseyBass/Wiley).

Notes

- 1 Andrew Hargreaves, *Teaching in the Knowledge Society: Education in the Age of Insecurity* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).
- 2 E. Abrahamson, *Change Without Pain: How Managers Can Overcome Initiative Overload, Organizational Chaos, and Employee Burnout* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004).
- 3 R.D. Gidney, *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario's Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).
- 4 D. Berliner, "Our Impoverished View of Educational Reform," *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 6 (2006): 949-995.
- 5 Andrew Hargreaves and Dean Fink, *Sustainable Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2006; A. Hargreaves and I. Goodson, "Educational Change Over Time? The Sustainability and Non-sustainability of Three Decades of Secondary School Change and Continuity," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 42, no. 1(2006): 3-41.
- 6 Michael Fullan, *Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2004).
- 7 Andrew Hargreaves and Dean Fink, "Why Ontario Does Not Measure Up," *Toronto Star*, 25 October 2005, A25.
- 8 T. Hatch, "When Improvement Programs Collide," *Phi Delta Kappan* 83, no. 8 (2002): 626-639.
- 9 M. Haikio, *Nokia: The Inside Story* (Helsinki, Finland: Edita, 2002).
- 10 P. Sahlberg, "Education Reform for Raising Economic Competitiveness," *Journal of Educational Change* 7, no. 4 (2006): 221-365; E. Aho, K. Pitkanen, and P. Sahlberg, *Policy Development and Reform Principles of Basic and Secondary Education in Finland Since 1968* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006).
- 11 Michael Fullan, *Turnaround Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2006).
- 12 Stephen Lewis, *Race Against Time: Searching for Hope in AIDS-ravaged Africa* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2006).
- 13 David Hopkins, *School Improvement for Real* (London: Routledge/Falmer, 2001): 167.
- 14 D. Shirley, *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1997); D. Shirley, *Valley Interfaith and School Reform: Organizing for Power in South Texas* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002).
- 15 J. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1996): 122-124..
- 16 Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
- 17 Kotter, 122, 124
- 18 A. Hargreaves, D. Shirley, M. Evans, C. Johnson and D. Riseman, *The Long and the Short of Raising Achievement: Final report of the Evaluation of the "Raising Achievement, Transforming Learning" Project of the UK Specialist Schools and Academies Trust* (Chestnut Hill: Boston College, 2006).
- 19 D. Dodd and K. Favaro, *The Three Tensions* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2007).



Show Teacher's Screen
 Monitor Students
 Control Applications
 Control Internet
 Instant Surveys
 Real-Time Testing
 Class Collaboration
 Lesson Planning
 and much more.

 FREE 25 User Trial

NetSupport School

Classroom Software **VERSION 8**



Top of its Class Since 1995