David Hopkins has unique insights into the conditions and constraints of school change, having been on both sides of the aisle as teacher, educational researcher and policy adviser for the British Labor government. This is clearly documented by his most recent book entitled Every school a great school: Realizing the potential of system leadership. It is a well written and concise description of the rationale behind Labor’s school policies in the last decade, following Tony Blair’s strong statement that the three top priorities of his government would be “education, education, and education.”

The basic message of the book is already indicated by the title: Hopkins believes that every school has the potential of becoming “great”—if the conditions are right and appropriate leadership is at hand. This idea is developed in three stages. In a first part (p. 1ff) he addresses the need to move from traditional “large scale approaches” towards school reform to a system-wide change process. The second part (p. 49 ff) outlines four key elements of this strategy, namely: “personalized learning,” “professional teaching,” “intelligent accountability,” and finally “networking and innovation.” The third part (p. 139) tries to wrap the whole issue up by outlining the concept of a “system leadership” as a key tool for making change happen.

The first part is very illustrative for Hopkins’ approach to the issue. Mixing insights drawn from his own experience, policy documents, educational research, and examples derived from change management in business and industry, he outlines the educational version of the “third way” approach of British Labor. School change, from this perspective, is conceived as quality improvement by management, albeit a management which does not pursue a top-down approach or a neo-liberal agenda. Rather, one tries to get those concerned in teaching and learning actively involved into changing their own field of action. As usual, the third way construction needs two counter-points of reference to construct itself as the happy medium. In this case the two opposites are large scale top-down approaches, which do not take the professionals who are teaching seriously enough, confronting bottom-up strategies. These often naively underestimate the need of institutional and political framing, which is necessary if change shall be sustainable.

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Most school researchers would readily agree with almost every argument put forward in this section, which then can lead to the impression that Labor’s third way is the natural outcome of understanding the shortcomings of all previous reforms. Who would not agree that reform needs an interplay of all levels and that the key point concerns how change can become a cherished property of those most intimately involved in daily interactions with pupils? According to Hopkins analysis’ all they need to do is to embrace that approach whole-heartedly—and then system wide change will be unstoppable.

The second section elaborates the key ingredients of change according to Hopkins (and Labor.) Again the argument is constructed by outlining two obviously incompatible and insufficient opposites, thus creating a middle ground, which is meant to reconcile or even to overcome the weaknesses of the former approaches. Take for example the discussion about “personalized learning” (p. 51 ff): On the one side Hopkins describes old-fashioned “mass provision,” designating the unimaginative forms of lecturing and worksheet activities that convey class room teaching at his worst. Who would not agree that this is not enough? On the other side there is its opposite: completely “individualized learning.” Of course this cannot be enough in a school setting, which has all its educational strength exactly by its nature of being a social experience shared with others. These opposites give leeway for the new mode, called “personalized learning,” which of course avoids all the short-comings and fallacies of the other two. In this scenario all pupils get exactly what they need from a teacher who is able to address individual and social needs in a combined and well-informed manner. Why the heck did not we realize that already 200 years ago when public schools began in western Europe?

And so it goes on: the “professionalized teachers” know how to integrate “content, process and social climate” (p 79); “intelligent accountability” makes everyone responsible by combining self- and external accountability in a way, which informs all and hurts none; and the “networking and innovation” processes make sure that all can participate in the happy change which is popping up everywhere. Section three adds the necessary tools of leadership to ensure that all this can unfold in a more or less straightforward way, if only everybody can agree that the third way is the one way which reasonable people should go.

In terms of what we know from educational research, one can object to this enthusiastic and optimistic approach primarily on two grounds. First of all, there is no thorough analysis of the extensive research on change processes, which has been gathering in sophistication and speed in recent years. Of course, Hopkins knows that there is research and experience contradicting his approach. But it is only quoted shortly, just to figure as an example of what can happen if one does not walk the right line as outlined in his book. Hopkins seems to underestimate the institutional side of change processes, of how much there is built in into the fabric of schooling, which cannot be simply done away by proper decision making.

As historian, I know too much already about the coming and going of many “irresistible” change ideas ever since “monitorial instruction” came around in the late eighteenth and early 19th centuries. Over and over again we have seen that institutional structures are able to digest change efforts in a way that leaves the basic structures alive and kicking. Moreover, Hopkins seems to underestimate the social conditions of change, not at least the fact that there are many stakeholders whose agendas and needs conflict with one another. There is no common ground of reform which suits all interests likewise, and of course different social classes and interest groups try to carve as much as possible out of the current systems, which fits their specific needs, even if that means that others get less.

Secondly, Hopkins underestimates the collateral damage of well meant reforms if they turn out otherwise as intended. Take the example of assessment and testing, of special
relevance given recent reforms in many nations. Of course, “intelligent accountability” would distribute the right piece of information to each and every teacher, without triggering unwanted side effects. But the reality of assessment is that it is prone to force everyone to put improved test scores at the top of their agenda, which in turn leads to teaching to the test, narrowing the scope and depth of the curriculum, and leaving children with special needs behind. Hopkins tries to avoid that by adding the importance of “good will” to the process and assuming that decision makers will not misuse the data at hand. But, plainly speaking, this is extremely naïve: almost all of the research we have internationally on the impact of the new testing regimes points in the opposite direction. No doubt, it could be otherwise, if only...

“If only”—this is the key to the whole argument: if only all involved agree, if only all would do the right thing, if only students or parents do not confuse the never ending happy hour of personalized instruction, and if only administrators can restrain themselves to soft engineering of the whole process, then nothing can stop the train towards “great schools” all over the place!

Reading Every school a great school, one catches oneself quite often marveling at this pie-in-the-sky charismatic world of well-doing and well-behaving change agents doing the right thing at the right point of time. If only everything was as simple as it is put forward in this book. Frankly, I have had too many direct experiences with the mishaps and constraints of actual school reform to share this soaring optimism. I have often, all too often seen great ideas ending up in unexpected collateral damage.

As much as I would like to believe in Hopkins’ message, my own experience and the research on school change at hand tells a rather different story. This story is all about obstacles, lack of capacity, and mishaps. It is about reform agendas failing and change agents tiring, politicians serving their own needs and students being left behind because of unwarranted side effects of the big approaches. Maybe there is not a “grand solution,” not this one and no other one, but school change is and remains the hard Sisyphean work of trying to make ends meet again and again. Like Hopkins I do believe that every school should be a “great school.” However, I see their greatness not in achieving system-wide value-added outcomes, but in facing the realities of their students and local communities in a sustained effort to make the best possible learning environment out of the conditions given at hand. Educational research can and should inform educators about the capacities and possibilities available to them and help them to achieve sustainable success even if they do not arrive in the hall of fame of “great schools” right away.

All in all: If you need a “one stop” source about the “soft engineering” rationale behind Labor’s third way policies, this is the book you should turn to. If you need a more realistic and differentiated theory of action for “making school improvement work,” please look for other sources that take the contradictions and the everyday life of school change more seriously than this approach is able to do.