Liberating the Schoolhouse

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Eighteen teachers, Baldwin Park High School's "leadership team," sit in a semicircle with their arms folded across their chests looking at the floor. The year is 2003 and the new principal, Julie Infante, an exuberant 44-year-old woman, explains how they are going to lead this high school out of its academic doldrums together. The teachers are clearly skeptical, either distrusting what Infante is saying or disbelieving that they can do it. The Los Angeles County school has hit bottom. The campus is littered with trash, fights are common, students cut classes without penalty, test scores are so low that the school's accreditation is in jeopardy, and the faculty is demoralized. The stakes are high because failure is an invitation for the state to take over.

Remarkably, in three years, between 2003 and 2006, with coaching from UCLA's School Management Program, the teachers and the principal accomplished a stunning success. By every important academic measure, the school made impressive gains. The campus was cleaned up, the number of disciplinary cases fell, student absenteeism declined, and test scores improved dramatically. Not surprisingly, the teachers felt more positive about the administrators and less isolated from one another, and their job satisfaction increased. But, in 2006, in an equally astonishing turn of events, the board of education and the superintendent removed Infante, replacing her with a new principal who began to reverse the bold steps that had produced the turnaround.

What happened? Why would the board and superintendent undo the actions that had produced such remarkable results? It was because they failed to understand what Infante and the UCLA coaches had accomplished. They were blinded by their own ambitions and by their conviction that administrative top-down control is the only way to run the schools. What they could not see was that Infante had turned the leadership of the school upside down, leading from behind the scenes and encouraging teachers to take control. As the teachers expanded their responsibility, a new professional authority began to emerge among them that translated into new norms for the school. Instead of blaming everyone but themselves for the students' failure, the teachers took on collective responsibility for the students' success.

This is a story about why bottom-up educational reforms that work cannot survive in the face of top-down control. It is ultimately a story about the use of power. The dominant belief is that top-down control is the only way to hold principals and teachers accountable for measurable results. The less prevalent belief is that bottom-up collaboration between teachers and administrators is a source of innovation that builds commitment to and support for successful reforms. The conflict has become especially important in the face of the federal No Child Left Behind initiative, which requires administrators to produce high test scores or risk their jobs. The pressure for test scores leads school boards and superintendents to mandate what is to be taught and to reward principals and teachers who comply

and punish those who do not. The effect of the law, says author Jonathan Kozol (http://prorev.com/2007/09/jonathan-kozol-blows-no-child-left.html) , is like placing a "sword of terror just above teachers' heads," causing many of the best of them to leave the profession.[1] As boards and superintendents usurp authority, the teachers who stay often become docile, as do other workers in stifling bureaucracies, resigning themselves to being told what to do. It is little wonder that without authority and leadership at the schoolhouse, gains made one day are so often erased the next.

Amazingly little research has been done on the subject of why school reforms are rarely sustained. Most of what passes for research is really little more than polemics. Books with promising titles like "Failure Is NOT an Option" and "Creating a Positive School Culture" invoke rhetoric about what should be done, without analysis of the underlying problems. How many years has education been a top national priority, and how much have we learned from the billions of dollars spent? Quite a few, and not much. The few research studies that have been done show that reforms do not last because leadership changes, districts change their focus, teachers lose their motivation, and energy for innovation diminishes.[2] But a close examination of the shakeup at Baldwin Park High School reveals an even more fundamental culprit: adherence to the belief that power can only flow from the top to the bottom.

I have seen the clash of these beliefs in every organization I have studied over the past 30 years, from schools and universities to trade and teacher unions, to corporations and police departments. The research is clear: Collaborative decision-making invariably improves employees' productivity, the quality of their work lives, and their job satisfaction.[3] But these improvements always wither with the introduction of top-down control, which strips employees of their professionalism, weakens their commitment to the organization's goals and dampens their motivation to work hard and do a good job.[4] In Baldwin Park we see both sides of the conflict play out. Once the board and superintendent decided to impose their control on the school, they destroyed the collaboration between the principal and teachers that had made it so vital. They also squandered the chance to build a new model of school-led reform that could have sustained the improvements over time. Unfortunately, Baldwin Park could be any school district in the country because the automatic and destructive use of top-down control is such a familiar and discouraging story.

The Turnaround

Baldwin Park is a medium-size city about 20 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. The school district comprises 14 elementary, four middle and three high schools, one of which is Baldwin Park High School. Baldwin Park High has an attractive campus built in the 1950s with low-slung buildings now housing about 2,400 students, 88 percent of whom are Latino. Nearly 20 percent speak little English. Students come from the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, with more than half receiving reduced-cost or free lunches. The school employs 84 teachers, who have taught there for an average of 10 years.

Before 2003, for as long as anyone can remember, the school had operated in the traditional manner. Teachers talk about how power had always been held by administrators, which had been the cause of many of the school's problems. Recalled one teacher, "We'd always had a top-down management style from time immemorial, and most of the problems on the campus were the result of the

administration rather than the administration preventing them." The school also had a reputation for being rough. Sergio Corona, a school board member who was its president during the turnaround, had attended Baldwin Park High School. He called it a "gladiator school." "People would come in from other cities every day and there were fights. I've seen rumbles at that school, and they were bad," said Corona. It was little wonder that Baldwin Park also suffered from a poor academic reputation. Mark Skvarna, a 53-year-old career Air Force man with a graying crew cut, came to the district in 1998 as its fiscal officer and became superintendent in 2001. He acknowledges that the school had the lowest possible statewide ranking on student test scores. "Its numbers were in the dumps. It was the worst of the worst," Skvarna said.

By most accounts, hiring Infante was an act of desperation. The students' low academic performance, measured by the California Academic Performance Index (API), was an embarrassment to the district, and the school badly needed new leadership. The API, a scale that runs from 200 to 1,000, is determined by annual testing. "At the time, the school was a 475 or 479, and it had been dropping and dropping. I think they were at a loss to know what to do with it," said Infante. Corona recalled that he asked Infante during her hiring interview: "We know that it's not the greatest school. What can you do?" Infante convinced him of her "game plan," explaining that the teachers felt alienated and that she wanted to empower them. "She was not telling me things I wanted to hear, but she had a coherent, logical plan ... that focused on learning," said Corona. Infante was hired. Though the board and district office hoped that her ideas would work, no one grasped how radical her plan really was.

Shortly after she took over as principal in 2002, Infante brought in UCLA's School Management Program to help her organize the teachers to rebuild the school. The program had a reputation for teaching principals and teachers to work collaboratively. The UCLA staff had helped Infante when she was an assistant principal in El Monte, a neighboring district. Now in Baldwin Park, two UCLA coaches signed on to support Infante and the 18 teachers who made up a new "leadership team."

In early 2003, Dan Chernow, executive director of UCLA's School Management Program, who knew my research and my interest in education, asked if I would like to join the project to document its progress. He showed me the school's abysmal statistics and described UCLA's plan to coach teachers to take responsibility by running their own meetings on the assumption that, by setting their own priorities and being responsible for follow-through, they would become school leaders. I told Chernow that I thought his strategy would fail. I had learned from my industrial studies that changing an organization's culture required changing how the work was done. In the case of Baldwin Park High School, I told Chernow, it meant changing what happened in the classroom. I was certain that his plan, like other reforms, would never reach the classroom or, more likely, that it would be swept aside by some new idea. But Chernow persisted, assuring me that I could write about whatever I found. Despite my skepticism, I agreed. Baldwin Park presented the chance to test my own ideas while I documented what I knew would be a certain failure. I was in for a surprise.

When I began the research, observing meetings, running focus groups and interviewing teachers and administrators, I was struck by the firmness of Infante's convictions about sharing decision-making power. One day I asked her if being a woman had anything to do with it. She drew up her short body in her chair and retorted: "I'm not the nurturing kind. I'll nurture kids, or someone in a professional

way, but I'm not a touchy-feely person." Though not "touchy-feely," she had been deeply influenced by a principal in her former district who had taken her under his wing when she left teaching to become an administrator. He called her "the young one" and made sure that she was exposed to the school's operations. Infante recalled that he "was looking at me as not just an assistant principal but thinking about what he could do to help me succeed. It shaped a lot of my dealings later with teachers because all of us want the same thing—to be motivated to try different things and to expand our horizons." She said she had learned about sharing decision-making in El Monte, where she helped build a new school from the ground up. "It has to be a team effort," she told me, weaving the fingers of both hands together. "Teachers and administrators have to do it together."

Infante's Vision

Months before Infante took over at Baldwin Park High, she visited the campus, talking with teachers to get a better picture of what was going on. She describes sitting in on meetings where teachers passed the time talking about housekeeping and pointing blaming fingers at the administrators and at each other. It was common to hear teachers talk about the school's "culture of failure," she recalls. "The teachers felt completely isolated. There was no trust among them, there was no concern to know what each other were doing. The teachers were overwhelmed and just trying to survive." The teachers' sense of isolation was passed along to students, who were oblivious to the shadow their test scores cast on the entire school community. "Students had no idea how their behavior shaped the school's poor image and that their failure ultimately came back to hurt them," said Infante. "The adults didn't know how to communicate with the students, so it was clear that it was going to take a lot of dialogue to turn this into one school [community]."

To reverse the school's course, Infante knew that the teachers had to become part of the decision-making process, something they had never done. "I wanted to develop a leadership team from a cross-section of the school—not just the cheerleaders," she explained. John Otterness, a former mathematics teacher who was one of the UCLA coaches, recalled, "Julie tried to make it a diverse group, not just the traditional leadership thing where you pull in the department chairs and that's about it." Infante said she asked for volunteers who "wanted to be part of an earth-shattering experience. I wanted them to feel honored to be selected and to know that they were on the ground level of change." Infante also included the local teachers' union representative to ensure that the union would feel part of her plan. After consulting with members of the faculty and department heads, Infante chose 18 teachers to be the new leadership team.

Despite her talk about shared leadership, few of the new team members believed her. "I was sure she was just another principal who'd come in, talk to us about distributed leadership, and grab all the marbles," said one teacher. Said another, "She talked a lot about herself and at first I didn't trust her." Infante behaved like a traditional principal to set ground rules to establish her authority. "I didn't want them to get the idea that it was going to be a free-for-all. I issued directives for those things that I felt were essential," said Infante. For instance, she insisted that every teacher post a daily agenda of instructional objectives and activities in their classroom. "I didn't budge on that," she said.

Though I was gaining confidence in Infante, I remained deeply skeptical of the notion that showing teachers how to run meetings could save a school that was in such dire straits. It seemed like trying to move a mountain with a feather. As I spent time talking with the teachers, it became clear that most of them were

frustrated with meetings that were held to discuss schoolwide issues. “People had to spend all that time and they felt a lot of it was worthless. The meetings lacked focus and nothing happened as a result,” one teacher recalled during a focus group. Infante and the UCLA coaches were certain that if the teachers learned how to set priorities and run effective meetings, their confidence would grow. They calculated that it would be the first step toward teachers taking on more responsibility.

But some teachers didn’t like being asked to make decisions they were not used to making. Despite their complaints about administrators holding all the power, many teachers actually wanted a principal who would make decisions for them. Taking on more responsibility meant more work. Some teachers interpreted Infante’s collaborative strategy as laziness. During a two-day meeting at a Disneyland hotel, one of the teachers took me aside and said, “Julie just wants us to do things she doesn’t want to do.” I asked Infante what she thought about what the teacher had said. She was undeterred: “Telling them what to do would have been easy for me, but it would have given them an ‘out.’ I wanted them to work at it, to try out some ideas.”

Infante steadily shifted an increasing number of decisions to the teachers and sat quietly at meetings while they worked them out. At a meeting with the UCLA coaches to get their perspective, Otterness told me, “Before long she was just sitting back like a fly on the wall. She didn’t say ‘yes’ and she didn’t say ‘no.’ She would participate in the discussions but she would leave the decisions to the teachers.” The other UCLA coach, Barbara Linsley, like Otterness a former teacher, remembered how Infante set the tone: “If Julie had anything that she wanted to share, she was the last one on the list, so the teachers got their stuff done first.”

Infante also hired two new assistant principals who shared her philosophy and they became part of the team. Over a cup of coffee in the faculty lounge, a teacher said of the new administrators: “They’re very supportive and they believe that change comes from the bottom up, not the top down. They jump right in and share the workload.” But Infante knew that jumping in and sharing their workload would not help the teachers take more control. Angela Salazar, one of the new administrators —a self-described “take charge” person—was frustrated because, with the whole group involved, making decisions was “slow as molasses.” She told me soon after being hired, “I jump in feet first. ... I want to just take over ... and say ‘This is how we do it.’ Someone has to take charge and boom, boom, boom, let’s go.”

Salazar said she offered to help the leadership team do “mundane stuff, just to take it off their hands. I have an office job, but they have to teach. I’d ask, ‘Do you want me to type that up for you? Would that help ...?’ I typed all the survey questions because it’s got to get done. I don’t mind. I like this stuff.” But what Salazar had not yet fully grasped was that the teachers had to take care of the details themselves if they were to truly take ownership. Infante guided Salazar, much as she had been guided by her former principal, pushing her ahead to work with the leadership team and then pulling her back when she felt Salazar was intruding on the teachers’ learning. Infante’s steady guidance began to pay off. Later in an interview Salazar acknowledged: “I think that Julie was right, that it’s got to come from the teachers.”

Over the next nine months the UCLA coaches continued to guide the leadership team toward taking more control, though it was not always a straight path. Using offsite retreats and common planning time, they read from books such as Malcolm Gladwell’s “Tipping Point.” and Alfie Cohen’s “The Schools Our Children Deserve” and discussed the implications. “We wanted to help the teachers expand their visions and think metaphorically about leadership,” said Otterness. “But an

obstacle was that teachers confused leadership with administratorship. They thought leadership was deciding where to store the computers, or where to put the white boards for the summer."

Teachers had been conditioned to look to authorities for answers, and when it came to making serious decisions, shedding this expectation was difficult for many of them. One teacher recalled, "At first, there was a big empowerment question. Everyone looked to the principal for answers to almost every question they had. They'd ask, 'Can we do it?' She'd say, 'Go do it. It's your thing!' " As the teachers began to realize that decisions they would make would affect their colleagues, they began to worry. As one said, "What should we do? We don't want to make mistakes" that could make things more difficult for the other teachers. Another teacher conceded, "I had trepidation when we began. But once we got past the basic learning about how to run meetings and started to apply it, setting priorities for the school began to make sense to me and it felt good."

The issue of improving student discipline was an early test for the leadership team. It was a difficult transition for the teachers to realize that they already had the knowledge and authority to solve this problem. They looked to the UCLA coaches for direction but the coaches refused to help. "When we started discussing how to solve the discipline problem, it was just the beginning of expanding their professional roles," explained Infante. "The teachers couldn't see that the steps had to come from their own experience. They just couldn't see it."

Despite Infante's reticence with her teachers, she was otherwise outspoken, a quality that got her into trouble with the board. At issue was the hiring of a new athletic coach in 2004. Infante had established a selection panel of teachers, parents and students that recommended a candidate to her. She took the name to the superintendent expecting the decision to be approved. But an influential school board member wasn't happy with the choice, so the superintendent told her to hire someone the board member wanted. According to Bill Sterling, a veteran teacher and member of the leadership team, "Everybody knew it was a political job done by the board." Infante had been put in an untenable spot because going back on the panel's recommendation would undermine her position with parents, teachers and students. It wasn't the first time Infante had run into what she called unprofessional behavior from the board, but she describes this act as the "final straw."

Infante applied for a job in another district, where she became a finalist. I recall how upset the teachers became at an offsite meeting when Infante told them she might leave, citing the long commute as a reason. Despite the teachers' dismay and anger at what felt like a betrayal, she never divulged the real reason, preferring to keep it between herself and the superintendent. The superintendent offered to talk to the parents for her, but Infante refused because it would look like she wasn't running the school. "I'll take the heat," Infante said she told the superintendent. "I'm respectful of the chain of command, and I'd never disrespect him in front of people," said Infante, "but behind closed doors we had a candid conversation." However, this independent, though respectful, behavior didn't project the kind of "team player" image the board wanted, and it cost Infante support in the long run. It is ironic that she would be faulted for being a poor team player given that, as events would show, her very strength was in teamwork. She decided to stay on at Baldwin Park High School.

In early 2004, a year into the project, Sterling and I surveyed the entire faculty in the school cafeteria to find out how they felt about the changes. The results were

not encouraging. Most of the teachers still blamed everyone but themselves for the school's poor performance. Ninety percent said that most of their colleagues were "high-quality" teachers, but less than half (46 percent) agreed that administrators (including Infante) were effective. Ninety-two percent of the teachers blamed the students, saying they lacked motivation, and 84 percent faulted the parents as being uninvolved in their children's education. More than two-thirds of the teachers (69 percent) thought the school's greatest weakness was the students' lack of discipline.

Infante and the leadership team took the results seriously, making the improvement of student discipline their top priority. The leadership team formed a subcommittee to better define the problem and consider solutions. Their new confidence in solving problems caught Infante's attention. She knew that if the teachers succeeded in devising a new discipline policy, it would represent real progress. "Right away I came back and talked with my two administrators in charge of discipline and told them, 'You better schedule a meeting with the leadership team as soon as they call because they've done their homework. They've put a lot of time into it and they're expecting to work together,' " Infante said. The leadership team and the administrators met a number of times, exchanged e-mails, and "before you knew it we were all on the same page developing a new discipline policy. It was definitely a trust-builder," said Infante.

The burst of confidence among the teachers was palpable. One said, "Finally we have an administrator who says, 'OK, go ahead.' And basically that was extending us the trust that, 'you are professionals, you can handle something besides unlocking a door and walking out.' And teachers rose to the occasion, doing what needed to be done. If this continues we could probably reform the whole school."

As their confidence grew, the leadership team began organizing their colleagues to visit classrooms at Baldwin Park High School (called "walkthroughs" in education parlance) to observe how students were learning and to start a schoolwide conversation about how to improve.[5] It was a dramatic change from how walkthroughs are usually conducted, by administrators who focus their attention on teachers. Under pressure from No Child Left Behind, districts are increasingly mandating that administrators spend more time in classrooms. But Sterling, who left teaching in 2007 to become an administrator in another district, told me over lunch that when walkthroughs are used as means of control they undermine teachers' professionalism. "Spending time in the classroom is the new mantra for every administrator in California. Our association tells us that we have to spend 50 percent of our time observing classrooms. The word comes from on high to do it. ... There is no training and the exercises are meaningless. No records are kept, and nothing happens with data. Administrators just do it to keep an eye on the teachers, to make sure they're teaching."

Infante and the UCLA coaches had something very different in mind. By insisting that teachers organize and conduct the walkthroughs themselves, they would ultimately have to take responsibility for the quality of teaching. Infante knew that she could have developed a rubric about the elements of good teaching, but she also knew that the teachers should create it themselves if their knowledge was to be used and if they were to become committed to the result. She accompanied the teachers on the first walkthroughs to show support, but, she said, "Then I let them do it for themselves. I purposely backed off though I'd go to the debriefings afterward to hear what they were learning. But they were running the show." Her strategy paid off. The teachers started their own "Critical Friends" lunch and after-school meetings, a reference to a popular way of structuring dialogue to discuss

teaching and the work students were doing. Infante noted that the seemingly insignificant step of showing teachers how to run meetings was now informing the teachers' leadership of the school.

Linsley recalled that while teachers were doing classroom walkthroughs, they were thinking about student discipline. The UCLA coaches gave the leadership team members readings on new ways of teaching and nudged the conversation to help them see the connections between teaching and student discipline. According to Linsley, "They began to see that there was more than one way to tackle the discipline issue. They began to see that it was tied to the quality of teaching." Infante recalls, "At first they didn't see the connection; they just thought a teacher had to stand up with these rules and the problem would go away." She continued: "Then they saw the solution was being good instructors who engaged their students actively in their learning. They came up with that. It was one of those 'aha' moments for me, 'Ah, they got it!' They realized that if you taught bell to bell with engaging lessons, the discipline issue takes care of itself."

As the leadership team expanded its attention to other issues—improving the instruction of students who spoke little or no English, encouraging parents to become engaged in their children's education, and aligning the curriculum with statewide tests—a new consciousness of the school as a community began to emerge. "I think it was when the teachers realized that each of them had a role to play in helping children learn English," said Otterness. "That was the breakthrough. Previously everyone had been isolated. They'd refer the large number of children with language problems to a single teacher who had been given the job. They blamed others, saying 'it's not my problem, it's yours.' But there came a recognition that the whole school was involved, administrators and teachers together, and it became 'it's our problem.' "

Another issue was how to better align what was being taught with statewide standards and the annual test. A group of teachers came up with an idea to develop a bank of standards-based questions for world history and U.S. history. They would administer a final exam and the students would be asked to review their own performance. Together they would discover the teaching techniques that helped students learn best. The teachers acknowledged that the idea of using tests to diagnose what students learned was not a huge innovation, but the process of engaging the students in an evaluation of their own performance was a radical shift from past practice, in which students were treated as passive recipients of information.

As the teachers began to make decisions together, they began to develop a new sense of authority in the classroom. One teacher told me in a hallway conversation, "This kind of thinking is totally different from what we've ever done!" The teachers knew that the district would demand changes because students' test performance was so bad, and now, with control of the process, they figured out a solution they thought would work. With their new authority, teachers began to model the same collaborative behavior that had been established between themselves and the administrators. Another teacher who joined us, added, "Instead of teachers complaining, 'Oh we have to create this test,' they're already doing it and they're excited. They want to do it."

Although not every leadership team member contributed equally, the members worked together in an increasingly seamless fashion. One teacher explained how her colleagues divided up the work based on their personalities and abilities. "There are the more gregarious people, and then there are people who are really good with

technology, and others who do a lot of the writing.” Even those who participated on the margins benefited from the collaboration and contributed by holding the social structure together. One particularly busy teacher spoke about the value she got from being consulted even when she couldn’t contribute. “When we were working on the tardy issue, we didn’t feel threatened when we saw a new draft policy written down. Why? Because I know that we worked on it together, and I get the chance to write ‘OK, I agree’ or ‘No, I don’t think this works.’ We’ll compile everyone’s responses before we decide. And I also know that if we say we’re going to do something, we’re going to do it.”

From Assembly Lines to Self-Managing Teams

The model of leadership that emerged at Baldwin Park High School had been long in the making. For the past 75 years, study after study has shown that employees want to have a say in decisions that affect them and want to be treated respectfully. When they are treated as people rather than robots, their satisfaction and performance improve. The Baldwin Park model, in fact, goes back to 1949 in the gritty coal mines of England. There, Eric Trist, a social psychiatrist, and Kenneth Bamforth, a miner and trade unionist, observed how miners had refused the dangerous and nonproductive system of mass production that had been forced on them by the government and mine owners.[6] The miners reverted to a traditional system that had been used for centuries called the “hand-got method,” which later became known as self-managing teamwork. These self-managing teams put decision-making back in the hands of the miners to restore human relationships, which are vital for safety and increased productivity. Later, Trist and his colleague Fred Emery developed a theory of organization and leadership called socio-technical systems (STS) that extended democratic principles into the workplace.[7] In the 1950s and 1960s Scandinavian companies such as Volvo and Saab began experimenting with self-managing teams based on STS theory, followed in the 1980s by U.S. companies including Hewlett-Packard and Nabisco.[8] More recently, these ideas have developed into organizations designed as networks to speed the rate of decision-making and innovation.[9] Infante says she was unaware of how her model fit into this historical context, but Baldwin Park reflected a new evolution of the same human impulse expressed by the miners and other workers—to have control over one’s work, to enjoy productive relationships with colleagues, and to feel a sense of satisfaction from doing a good job.

By the end of 2004, Infante’s vision began to show results as the school—administrators, teachers and students—began to emerge as a single community. The campus was cleaner as students started picking up after themselves; tardies and cuts dropped in frequency; and the school’s test score index shot up an amazing 95 points in less than two years, a gain that placed Baldwin Park High School among the schools with the greatest increase in scores. Infante recalled of her staff, “at first they thought it was a mistake. They didn’t believe in themselves.”

The changes had quietly emerged from within the teachers’ own ranks without fanfare. In a conversation with a group of teachers in the faculty lunchroom, one commented: “Some people expected UCLA to come in with all the answers. They didn’t, but they lit the road and we guided ourselves. I don’t know that anybody thought what we did was all that monumental ... but now suddenly stuff works. It’s changing our lives.” Another teacher leaned over the table and whispered, “It was like an invisible takeover, a secret government that never actually took power.”

It was amazing to witness the school’s culture begin to shift as the teachers’ self-

confidence grew. I was as surprised as they were, but for different reasons. Up to that point, I was blind to the possibility that training teachers to run meetings could enable them to believe in themselves, begin to trust administrators and share decision-making with the principal. I had stubbornly clung to my original conviction that changes in teaching had to start in the classroom if they were going to have any impact. I recalled a story told to me more than 10 years prior by Marty Neil, a general manager at Hewlett-Packard when my research team and I were studying the company. Neil said with a laugh, “There’s nothing more dangerous than a good idea ... when it’s the only one you have.” I had retold his story with delight many times, never imagining that it might apply to me. But now with the school’s success staring me in the face, I realized I had fallen into the same trap.

New norms, the foundation of an organization’s culture, were being established. After a meeting where we had designed the 2005 faculty survey, a teacher told me: “People are taking instruction time more seriously. Kids used to come in and say, ‘It’s Friday. Do we watch a movie today?’ But you don’t hear that as much anymore.” The rancor of a group of teachers who challenged these new ideas also grew smaller as their colleagues took on more leadership.

UCLA’s Otterness noted that the changes were subtle but powerful. “We’d walk through and it looked like they were still doing pretty much traditional teaching. But what had changed was that teachers and students were taking things more seriously.” The leadership team had opened up a schoolwide discussion about good teaching, including how to teach students who spoke little or no English. In turn, as the teachers began to trust their new authority, they began to extend collaboration into the instructional process, working with students to develop lessons that would prepare them for high-stakes tests.

In 2005, a second teacher survey showed that improvements were taking hold and spreading throughout the teaching staff. More than half of all teachers (55 percent) reported that administrators were good leaders (an increase of nine percentage points over 2004); the importance of discipline as a problem had fallen by 19 percentage points to 41 percent of teachers who agreed; and ineffective discipline as a school weakness had dropped 38 percentage points to 31 percent agreement. Though teachers had been skeptical of the leadership team at first, more than half of the teachers (57 percent) reported that it gave them an important voice in how the school was run. More than a third (36 percent), many of them younger teachers, wanted to join the team.

Everything was riding on continued accreditation by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, an accreditation that had been jeopardized by the school’s long history of failure. After a thorough review of the school’s self-study report, representatives of the accrediting group visited the school. According to Infante, the visitors were impressed with what she and the teachers had accomplished in such a short time. The accrediting group’s report pointed to improved attendance, reduced tardiness rates, increased enrollment in higher-level math and science courses, and remarkable gains in test scores for all students including Latinos and low-income students. The report also praised the school’s leadership team, noting that it had helped “create a culture of change and improvements.”[10]

“They couldn’t believe that such big changes could be made in three years and that it was the teachers who had made them,” Infante said. It was common knowledge that a principal’s tenure in Baldwin Park was short, so it was not surprising that the accrediting team expressed concern about whether the school’s achievements could be sustained. “They told me that they were worried that the teachers’ leadership

would fall apart when I left," explained Infante. But she was confident that enough groundwork had been laid for the teachers to carry on without her if necessary. In its summary, the committee wrote: "Clearly, Baldwin Park High School has much to be proud of. Students appear eager to learn and the faculty is dedicated and eager to create a meaningful educational experience for its students."[11] As an official stamp of approval, the association gave the school the maximum six years of accreditation.

Many teachers shared the accrediting association's concern about what would happen when Infante left. Some worried that the district might replace Infante with a more traditional leader who would erase the progress they had made. A leadership team member took me aside after a team meeting and said, "I hope that they'll see the tremendous amount of time, energy and resources that went into this, and that we'll get another like her, not a principal who will try to reinvent the wheel."

In January 2006, Associate Superintendent Lynne Kennedy invited Sterling, Chernow and me to present the results to the Baldwin Park board of education. When we walked in, the meeting room was so packed that it was hard to find a chair. After we spoke, board President Sergio Corona commended the school for the remarkable results and praised UCLA for its guidance. Then he asked, "What should the board do with the school now?" Chernow politely replied that the board should take steps to protect the school from district interference and that it should find ways to spread the model to other schools. Though Corona and other board members nodded in apparent agreement, it would soon become clear that Chernow's advice had fallen on deaf ears.

Beliefs Collide

As many had feared, less than six months later, on July 1, 2006, the board and superintendent removed Infante. She was put in charge of the district's music program and given the title principal at large. Infante said she was replaced because the district did not want other schools to follow in her footsteps. "They gave me credit when I was the principal, but it was clear that they didn't want the model. If they had given me credit ... it would have given me too much power, and they didn't think I was entitled to it. It's basically the message, 'Yeah you did good work but now your heydays are over.' " Skvarna said of the transfer: "Julie has a music background. She was a big band nut and we had a guy who retired. We put her in there and she loved the idea of doing that." Though he tries to put a gloss on it, he clearly wanted a different leadership model and a principal who could deliver it.

No one I spoke with at the district had in fact understood what Infante had been doing since the day she was hired. Former board President Corona recalled that when Infante was being interviewed in 2002, he told her: "You're an artist and this is your studio. Do it." It was an odd comment coming from Corona, for he was clearly influenced by an industrial model of leadership. In an interview in 2006, before Infante had been removed, I asked Corona if he saw evidence of teacher leadership at the school. He replied, "I don't have any data to indicate that there's leadership going on there. ... I am results-oriented, so if the API scores are going in the right direction ... that tells me that the machinery is working." He continued: "It's like an engine. I don't need to know if the spark plugs are clean or dirty. I don't need to know how the belt is moving. If something goes wrong then I'll look into it. ... If it is true, what Julie's saying, that there's leadership, all right. The bottom line should tell us that."

Corona's metaphor of the school as a machine brought to mind Charlie Chaplin's classic film "Modern Times." In it, his famous character, the Little Tramp, suffers a mental breakdown from being overworked on an assembly line. It is actually significant that Corona used industrial imagery to describe the school's workings because public schools were formed in the image of early 20th century industry, from its command and control management to the assembly lines that produced the finished product. A mother who visited an early public school said that the long lines of children "looked to me like nothing so much as the lines of uncompleted Ford cars in the factory, moving always on, with a screw put in or a burr tightened as they pass—standardized, mechanical, pitiful."[12]

But today, this century-old model is slowly becoming an anachronism in industry, because it hobbles companies in fast-changing business environments. It also has a debilitating human impact that turns workers, like the Little Tramp, into drones and alienates them from their jobs.[13] But the image still exerts a paralyzing grip on the many schools that continue to be run like industrial assembly lines, with boards of education and superintendents telling principals and teachers how to mass-produce educated children. Infante's transformation of Baldwin Park High presented an opportunity for the district's leaders to break away from worn-out ideas and support a significant and promising innovation that could have put them on the map. Infante had put the model right under their noses. But their fixation on being in control and bottom-line-oriented, without interest in how results are produced, led the board and superintendent to make profoundly wrong decisions.

From the perspective of the board and superintendent, that was not the case. They in fact argue that they deserve most of the credit for creating conditions in which the school could be rehabilitated. Skvarna, who speaks of himself as a tough and unconventional thinker, claimed he had to clean house before Infante came. "There was a cadre over there," he explained to me in an interview in February 2006. "There was a couple of coaches and they ran the school and this one guy had been there since God came looking for his tennis shoes. And we fired him ... and we took him down. ... That place needed to be torpedoed." He also said he took a hard line with the union and that because he had a military background he drew criticism. Skvarna described how union leaders said: " 'Here comes this military guy. He's never been in the classroom. You know he's not wanting to sit around and say Kumbaya.' " Skvarna continued, "I'm not really interested in hugging kids," and said he sidestepped conflict with the union by providing teachers with hefty raises.

Corona's replacement as school board president, Jack White—a World War II paratrooper, retired LAPD commander and former Baldwin Park mayor—agreed with Skvarna that the board deserves most of the credit for the district's success. White explained in an interview at the district office in July 2007 that the board was tired of the school's long history of failure and that it took a "new look at everything, a new emphasis." Skvarna said that success was not confined to Baldwin Park High School and was common across the district. "You find that everywhere. We have got three or four schools this year right on the heels of 800 API."

In fact, academic achievement dropped districtwide in 2007, and the state put the entire district on the equivalent of academic probation. The facts also show that no school in the district made the same progress as Baldwin Park High School in that same period. Certainly, none of them had been restructured in the same way either. Just a year earlier, Skvarna and his top assistant had told me of their plans to promote the district to attract national attention. Associate Superintendent

Kennedy, whom Skvarna said he was grooming to take over, said proudly, “Our goal is to be on the front cover of Time or on “60 Minutes.” They’re going to notice what’s going on here in Baldwin Park.” Skvarna said that he had been meeting with the Gates Foundation and that he had been invited to talk with “big shots” at the New School Venture Fund, adding that he had spoken with people from the Harvard Business School. “You know,” he said, “That’s quite a compliment. We’re a hell of a long way away from Harvard.”

The irony was inescapable. Infante and the teachers had provided the superintendent and board with an educational model that would have put them on the map. Instead, they removed her and took control of the school, declaring victory for the whole district, only to be threatened with a state takeover if the district didn’t improve. I wondered why the district leaders could not see what seemed so obvious. The evidence I saw pointed to the fact that neither the board nor the district office staff grasped or valued what Infante had achieved. They were so convinced of the correctness of their own belief about leadership—a hierarchical model that was diametrically opposed to hers—that no other idea registered with them.

After Infante’s removal in 2006, I met with Skvarna in his office. He explained how he thought Infante had led the school. “How did she do it?” he asked. “Did she get behind them and go like this?” he asked, pushing upward with his hands. “No. She got in front and led them.” He added, “Julie built the foundation and we’re going to build on it and not destroy it.” But after Infante was removed, it became clear that they meant to build something quite different than that which she and the teachers had created.

In his new book, “The Three Ways of Getting Things Done,” the late biochemist and former CEO of Shell Chemicals Gerard Fairtlough argues that top-down control dominates our thinking about management because of the widespread belief that it is the only guarantee of discipline and order.[14] The belief is so deeply etched in the Western psyche that all other possibilities are occluded. Fairtlough could have been writing about Baldwin Park High School as he describes how centralized control makes it impossible to sustain change because the only learning that takes place is at the top of the organization and everyone else simply follows orders. For the district leadership to consider that power could flow in the opposite direction, up from the ranks of the teachers, was simply unimaginable. But witnessing how the teachers led the Baldwin Park High School turnaround is forceful evidence of Fairtlough’s admonition: “The identification of discipline with hierarchy is a mistake—a dangerous mistake. Actually, it’s the professionalism of the work force that matters.”

In my conversations with Skvarna, teachers’ professionalism was never mentioned. Even though the evidence of the school’s performance was right before him, the superintendent remained convinced that Infante had merely made the teachers feel good. He said, “UCLA, Baldwin Park School District and the leadership of that school harnessed that staff. They’ve taken that staff’s attitude from demoralized, and I give credit to the sites, and I give it to the teachers, and I give it to the folks that work there. That staff is no longer demoralized.” From his perspective, Infante had done little more than infuse new energy into a demoralized staff. “The school had been staggering along on yesterday’s mail for quite a few years—the teachers, the staff, the whole operation,” the superintendent recalled. “When the UCLA team came in, you might call it a Hawthorne effect,” he said, referring to an industrial experiment from the 1920s and 1930s that showed that when researchers paid attention to workers, their productivity increased, though little else about their

work environment had changed.

But Infante had done much more than just cheerleading. She had turned the management pyramid on its head and taught the teachers how to take control. The school was not a machine that ground out results, but an uncommonly productive web of human relationships that had emerged from Infante's vision and courage. The district administrators' lack of understanding of what had happened at the school, and the unspoken assumption that hierarchical control was the only leadership model, demonstrated the extent to which top-level district decision-makers were prisoners of this single idea.

Though the board's policies were ostensibly for "the kids," in Corona's words, in effect they served to tighten control of the schools. Kennedy says that board policy had eliminated barriers between the district office and the schools and removed unnecessary employees. While these changes no doubt helped streamline operations, it also had the effect of centralizing power in the superintendent's office. In February 2006, when I interviewed Skvarna and Kennedy together in the district office, Kennedy described her vision of leadership as Skvarna nodded approvingly: "It's the school site that's important. We have to make sure we go from good to great [a reference to a popular business book that has been adopted by many educators]. You get the right people on the bus and get them in the right seat." As Kennedy continued there was little doubt where the decision-making power lay. She said as though speaking to a principal, "Yes, we'll support you because we're going to expect a lot, but on the other hand we're going to hold you accountable for doing these things. We're going to walk you through them and be there with you, but it has to happen. Those are the non-negotiables."

Both Skvarna and White attribute much of their professional success to their military training. White says, "I go back to the chain of command and a principle called Unity of Command. That means you should have only one boss ... you see it very clearly in the military." For two years, Skvarna had taken the district's principals, what he calls his "leadership team," to the Army War College, where they analyzed the Civil War battle at Gettysburg. Skvarna says, "I want them to realize that regardless of whatever the situation they will run into, what's going to get them through is leadership."

At one point, I asked the superintendent what kind of leader he hoped to find to replace Infante. "I'm looking for someone who can dance ... multitask. Somebody that's going to have an excellent attitude," he replied. "Not somebody who is going to give me a bunch of fluff. ... Education is just full of bullshit and the current fad of the week. None of this [his approach] is fad-based. It's just good solid leadership from the board right on down the line."

A New Direction

The man selected to replace Infante, Luis Cruz, a 38-year-old former Baldwin Park middle school principal, is considered a rising star in the district. He dresses stylishly and has close-cropped hair and a look of a quick intelligence. Most of the teachers I talked with like him and seem drawn to his magnetic personality. One teacher said: "He's a hands-on person. He's a motivational speaker and he runs our meetings." Another teacher described the new principal as a "natural talent and a good communicator." The superintendent described him as "either a Ph.D. or near a Ph.D., bilingual and bicultural. He's a real believer in the system." Indeed, Cruz appeared to be a good fit for the system in which he now had to succeed.

When I interviewed him at the end of his first year in 2007, Cruz explained that his

plans for his second year had taken shape. "I'm not a top-down administrator-leader," he said. "I believe in leadership being distributed and shared." But he then proceeded to make it clear that it was he who was going to set the goals for the school. Despite his disavowal of top-down leadership, his praise for Infante and the leadership team's progress, it became obvious that he, like Skvarna, was operating from a command-and-control position.

I wanted to find out what the original leadership team members thought about the changes, so I attended an offsite meeting of the school in March 2007 and then began interviewing a number of the teachers. In one interview, a teacher said he liked the new principal and praised his political skill. But he added, "He appears to be democratic, but he gets input from the teachers to make his decisions seem legitimate, to lessen the opposition." Another teacher who also says she likes the new principal, told me, "I'm sure he has the best intentions and thinks he's doing distributed leadership, but it's not the way I learned it. Now we find out what we're to do from our boss, or a few small committees. He already has the decisions made. He'll come up with an idea and says, 'This is what I think would be great. What do you think?' " When we spoke in 2007, Cruz was certain about his goals for the coming year: to increase the number of students with sufficient credit to graduate on time, to improve instruction and to get more parents involved. To these ends, he said, he had reorganized the leadership of the school. The old leadership team was now the "assembly," the department chairs the "senate," and the administration the "executive branch."

According to some teachers, the new principal uses his authority to keep control. "The new principal is regarded by the district as their 'fair-haired boy' and he has a lot of power," one told me. "People know he's tough and doesn't lose a fight once he's in it. No one will cross him. The teachers are intimidated. And as they feel more powerless they stop caring. They stop thinking about the kids and pay more attention to their own positions." But other teachers say they like the fact that Cruz has relieved them of much of the work they had to do as members of the leadership team. One said, "When Julie was principal, my job was a lot harder, but Luis has taken a lot of pressure off us. We're not up front running the meetings anymore and we have less responsibility, but when you're teaching six or seven periods a day, it's a lot to do."

By the summer of 2007, a few teachers saw that the new principal's charismatic personality and his take-charge style had begun to erode the teachers' decision-making. One teacher elaborated, "He's divided the teachers and seized control." Another said, "No one seems to notice because the principal runs a tight ship. Every kid has an ID and gets checked at the gate. Kids on passes wear orange vests so you can see them right away. Things look shipshape, but the effect has been to make the teachers docile."

One of Cruz's initiatives for the 2007-2008 school year, he says, is to improve the school's core instruction. Just after he took over, he discontinued the UCLA contract because coaching the teachers was not part of his new vision. He described to me a movie he had made of children talking about good teaching. He said he was going to present it to the teachers, "to show them what can be done." And he plans to go further with his supervision of instruction. "We're going to come up with a rubric—what's good classroom management? We're going to share it with the teachers and then hold them accountable. Like when you join a gym, you get a trainer. We've hired two instructional coaches. I don't want the teachers to think that these coaches are spies or reporting to me on their teaching. I don't care about that. But my administrators and I are going to spend 60 to 70 percent of our time

in the classrooms. What I want to see is 'does the teaching improve?' This is our job, the executive branch's job."

When it came to discussing the meteoric rise in the school's API scores before he took over, Cruz revealed a certain political savvy, showing that he could "dance" as the superintendent wanted. In 2007 the school registered a modest 15-point increase in its API, making it clear that the days of near triple-digit gains had ended. Cruz was dismissive, on one hand, of the API, saying he doesn't give it a "heavenly focus" because it measures only part of what children learn. But on the other, he said, it helps to keep the board out of his business. "It has a political use," he said. "If the scores are up, people say 'there's something right happening there.' " But if the API scores drop, he said, the board would be "down here saying 'what's going on?' "

The Erosion of Schoolhouse Authority

The reversal of the school's direction was taking place out of sight, obscured by the din of life in a big high school and the skill of a control-minded principal with a disarming personality. Just as the changes that liberated the school in 2003 and set it on a new course came quietly, as though there had been a "secret takeover," the new administrative control is taking root without much notice. Each step the new principal has taken is in the direction of substituting the teachers' leadership and authority with his own. Writing about individuals coming to "self-hood," psychologist C.G. Jung explains how the substitution of authority can artificially inflate a leader's authority while creating dependency among followers.[15] Jung writes about the "mana personality," the ancient image of what he calls "a wise man" whose authentic authority we desire for ourselves. But because such authority lies beyond our consciousness, we project it onto others instead of finding it in ourselves. These projections, says Jung, are the making of heroes and "the godlike being," and they often land on superiors, particularly charismatic ones, imbuing them with authority beyond that which they actually possess.

These unconscious projections can become problematic, as in the case of Baldwin Park, where the board, superintendent and principal apparently intend to hold power over the teachers because they operate invisibly, outside of conscious control. Once the institutional authority of the district and principal are fully re-established, the dependency of the teachers will again become an accepted way of life. Leading the school from the bottom up, as Infante did, will be all but impossible.

What will break this addiction to control? Collaborative models of leadership seem to be everywhere but the schools. Pick up any book on innovation in companies and you will find teamwork at the center. For decades, companies like Hewlett-Packard have been experimenting with self-managing teams, and New United Motor Manufacturing (NUMMI, a GM-Toyota joint venture) implemented the now-famous Toyota Production System, which in the 1990s led to a revolution in the design of productive organizations. Fairtlough describes new complex systems of which British Petroleum and W.L. Gore & Associates (makers of Gor-Tex) are examples. In their book "Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything," authors Dan Tapscott and Anthony Williams provide other models based on collaboration and self-organization.[16] The list includes established industrial firms such as Boeing, Procter & Gamble and BMW, plus a host of new companies like MySpace and the Human Genome Project, all of which are moving away from hierarchical control.

An important feature these models have in common, and which could be seen in the making at Baldwin Park High School, is that control is distributed, allowing teams to manage themselves, as the English coal miners did more than half a century ago. As employees take responsibility for decision-making, they develop an authentic authority, meaning the kind of authority that comes from knowing something well and having control over one's working conditions. When individuals begin to develop this kind of authority, they are less likely to project it onto others because they already possess it, and they are more likely to become independent in their thoughts and actions.

At Baldwin Park High School, teachers acted on their newfound authority and brought students into the learning process. They discovered that when they engaged students with interesting lessons, discipline problems disappeared and test scores went up. Yet, many schools persist with the "skill and drill" style of instruction, in which students are treated as empty vessels that need to be filled with information. The value of collaboration was a cornerstone of the thinking of educational philosophers John Dewey and Paulo Freire.[17] They noted that when teachers and students develop their own authority, they become more informed and active citizens who are less willing to be cowed by those who wield just institutional authority.

Though the window for innovation was open at Baldwin Park for a few years, it has now been shut. The last time I saw Infante, in October 2007, she was still running the district's music department. It is housed in what appears to have been a storehouse next to the railroad tracks about a quarter-mile from the district headquarters. She took me to her windowless office through rooms cluttered with trombones, pianos and accordions. She sat back in her chair, rolling her eyes at her surroundings. "Somebody has to manage this department," she said. "But, it doesn't build on what I know." Infante was still unhappy about her title, principal at large, because it meant a principal without a home. She asked the superintendent repeatedly to change her title to director, a title more in line with that of other former principals. "It's just not a high priority item for [Skvarna]," she said. "But it sends a big message to me that they just don't care."

Reflecting on her four years as principal at Baldwin Park High School, Infante acknowledged that her style was out of step with the board's demands. She was also not good at public relations, especially when it was about her. "I just didn't like having to manage that drama, the information and misinformation that was given to the board." She could see conflict looming, in part because the way she wanted to engage the parents was at odds with the board's idea. "They equate numbers with success," Infante said. She explained that the issue for her was not how many parents could be packed into a room, but what they were doing there: What value were they getting from being there? What were they learning to better support their children? When she was replaced, Infante was carefully building a base of parent support through the teachers, the same way she had led other changes at the school. "It was going to be a struggle," she admits, "because I knew it wasn't what the board wanted. They wanted numbers." Nevertheless, Infante says that her time as principal of Baldwin Park High School was life-changing. A smile broke over her face when she told me, "The greatest achievement was that, for those years, we sustained the group. People look at that school as a school that truly changed."

The last meeting of the leadership team that I observed was in the spring of 2007. Cruz was running the meeting from a seat in the corner of the room as two teachers wrote on the board, taking cues from him. The teachers were not so dispirited as they had been at the beginning of this story, folding their arms and staring at the

floor, but the lively banter and chaos of collective leadership was gone. The meeting was orderly and people spoke one at a time as they covered one by one the points in the principal's agenda. They discussed a new district mandate that the school be reorganized according to the newest educational fad, "small learning communities."

As I talked with some of the teachers over lunch, it was clear that they know something important has been lost. "No one ever asked us about the small learning communities," one of the original leadership team members said. "We used to make these decisions, but all of a sudden this came, 'boom,' out of the blue, with a huge push. 'Get on board or else go find another job.' The tools we learned from UCLA—running meetings, walkthroughs, and Critical Friends—they're just sitting over there on the side not being used." Another leadership team member complained, "No one knows what's going on except the principal." Other teachers agreed that information was tightly held. One said, "It's like an amoeba, we're going in all directions but I don't know where we're headed." Another said wistfully, "The community has broken down. We don't run the meetings anymore, and I really miss the common meeting time."

Making a clean sweep of it, in March 2008 the superintendent fired Infante from the district, citing budget problems. Infante remained philosophical saying, "You know how hard it was at first to move the school forward. But once the teachers began to take control you could feel the excitement. It's so sad to see that all of it could be destroyed in a year and a half."

I met Bill Sterling for lunch near his new district's headquarters to get his take on what was going on. Sterling, who retains close ties with Baldwin Park High School, says that he likes Cruz personally, and he supports some of the things he has done. "But," he wonders, "what's the cost?" He reflected on his years as part of the leadership team and answered, "The teachers are feeling powerless now, so they won't care what happens. What most administrators don't understand is, the more leaders—people who are self-actualized—a campus has, the better things are."

I was saddened listening to Sterling's account. "In 2003, when the teachers began to feel empowered, there were strong voices on the faculty," he recalled. "Each of us believed that every one of our kids could succeed. The school was on its way to ingraining this idea. Imagine how it could have been if we'd had another six or seven years to make it really solid. We were on the verge of something great. It's too bad." As we concluded the interview, Sterling turned philosophical, remembering what a huge change the teachers went through and the "monumental" impact the experience had on him. "When I'm a principal, I'll be 180 degrees different from the others. I will empower the teachers."

Oppression or Hope

But will he ever get the chance? In the minds of today's top educational administrators, exerting control over others is justified as a way of keeping order and discipline, and because they are ultimately held accountable. But one has only to witness the expensive buyouts of superintendents' contracts to realize that failure is also rewarded. Those with ambitions to reach the top are usually gifted in using institutional power to achieve their ends. Once promoted to the upper levels, these ambitious and skilled individuals who have already been socialized to the institution's norms feel entitled to what they have achieved. They also benefit from the substantial rewards that come with being at the top—money and power—and they do not share it easily. Each of us—citizens and educators alike—is going to

have to break our obedience to centralized control or doom the public schools to Sisyphus-style reforms, repeating the same mistakes over and over, because the reforms never last. No progress can be made so long as we remain blind to the suffocating effects of centralized power.

If we are lucky, some of us have memories of education at its best. Mine is from a two-room schoolhouse in northern Wisconsin where the teacher taught us from experience—catching fish and studying their habits, measuring the sun's path through the school's windows, planting trees and learning the difference between White and Norwegian pines. Those memories have guided me through 30 years as a professor of education at UCLA, hoping that public education could live up to its promise. But now I have to face the rather bleak assessment that centralized power oppresses the very qualities that ignite innovation and learning. What are the alternatives? In a 2003 interview (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7LUkXab-og) with Charlie Rose, Norman Mailer offered a chilling one. Mailer says that democracy cannot be injected into a society that is not ready for it, adding, "I think the natural state of government for most people is fascism." Asked why, he replied, "because it is easier."[18]

I remain more hopeful. The urge to control seems written into our DNA, but we do not have to be its hostage. The Baldwin Park case is a reminder of a more promising way. It shows how much progress can be made in a short time—and how quickly it can be erased if it is not understood. We need to take back authority for ourselves so that we can see and name the collaborative model of leadership that Infante and the teachers created. Only then can it take its place as an alternative to central control. It will take more than rhetoric trumpeted by the media, politicians and schools of education to do it. It will take nothing less than changing our minds.

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