

Some thoughts about the **Truthdig** article

The fate of Baldwin Park was not inevitable. But the resources to prevent what is made to seem inevitable were either unavailable or more likely unimaginable to the principal, the staff, or even more seriously to the UCLA consultants invited in to guide the practice of the school.

For a single school just to create the changes described at Baldwin Park is in itself remarkable. But to sustain them and continually develop the resources to make them integral to the core culture of the school would have required a range of other resources that were not recognized by the school or just not available to its leadership.

Resources might include for example:

Other schools seeking similar re-forming, preferably in a network that itself had articulated some shared norms/values/practices. For the principal, other principals to meet with for support. For teachers, fellow teachers in other schools to exchange ideas & practices, especially around issues of capacity building and genuine professional development.

Some organizing entity that could act as intermediary between individual schools and district(s), act as spokesperson for the network, serve as advocate and political guide at local, state, regional and even national levels, act as broker/fundraiser to leverage funds to serve the common needs of the network.

A place to find and make available the lessons learned in schools, to articulate the research findings, to analyze, develop and propose for discussion hypotheses drawn from this learning and to make lessons learned accessible to others in diverse fields.

A place to co-ordinate the design and implementation of true professional development, building upon the practices and action research of teachers, principals and administrators across the network(s). Research makes clear that it is the combination of true professional development + networking that creates sustainable school reform.

There are several assumptions made in this article that I question. For example, the dichotomy between “Top-Down” and “Bottom-Up” is too simple by far. In the public school systems of this country, because a number of issues governing schools derive from legislation by individual states and their elected governments, there are inevitably a range of constraints, financial and otherwise, that schools are required to honor. But there is a wide range of choices that are negotiable. This may take time and skilled politics but is not carved in stone.

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The same applies to curriculum. Some states do have a carefully drafted “state” curriculum. But this is also subject to change as part of a political process (see for example what is happening to “evolution”). Even when mandated, most curriculum only prescribes “What” is to be taught, not “How” it is to be taught.

Another important section of the article starts on page 11 (“From Assembly Lines to Self-Managing Teams”). This refers to an evolving understanding of how organizations actually work and how this applies to schools as organizations. It contrasts the traditional, top-down only, hierarchical, command-and-control model so familiar to military personnel (and sports coaches) with what the article calls the Self-Managing Teams approach, emphasizing bottom-up, capacity building. This is increasingly influencing school leadership thinking. It is well expressed in the writings of Peter Senge and colleagues at MIT. I believe it would be valuable to make some of this part of the preparation for our own Guided Practice Consultants.

My own introduction to Peter Senge was back in 1993 and I have been impressed by how this group has evolved in the fifteen years since that time. For me it came just as I was beginning to work on the development of the A+ Program at the Kenan Institute. Let me briefly describe how A+ evolved because Senge’s writings were influential in that.

From 1993 through 2004, the Kenan Institute developed a statewide program in North Carolina. The A+ Program was designed as “a comprehensive school reform program that views the arts as fundamental to how teachers teach and how students learn in all subjects”. Twenty-five schools formed the initial A+ Network in fall 1995.

In 2004, the new generation of leaders of the Kenan Trust decided to terminate their investment in the A+ Program, to change completely the direction of the Kenan Institute, and to negotiate the transfer of the program to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. This marked the end of the initial development phase of the North Carolina A+ Program. Since its adoption by UNCG, it has continued to sustain its network of schools and to attract additional new schools within the state. In the coming fall (2008), a total of forty-one schools make up the network. Twenty-three of the original twenty-five schools will begin their fourteenth continuous year as A+ schools.

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