



Implementation Case Study:

Ready for the Roll-out!

At Revolutionary Schools, we often find ourselves working to counteract a pervasive “silver bullet” culture. We help districts begin where they are, working with the resources they already have, to dramatically increase student learning. Rather than blaming teachers for low student achievement, we consider teachers to be at the heart of the solution. However, as instructional accountability increases, teachers are given less and less autonomy – *less* autonomy over those same things they are being held *more* accountable for.

The cycle is predictable. Schools attempt to rise to increasing expectations by employing innumerable silver bullet solutions—quick fixes promising significant impacts. Over time, teachers have evolved under the silver-bullet scenario. They incorporate or improve upon new ideas they believe will work for their students and ignore everything else. Unfortunately, this tinkering occurs with little to no coordination between teachers, grades, and schools. The typical result is lower cumulative levels of student learning, then more political and public dissatisfaction with schools. Pressured by an angry public, schools set about working in good faith to resolve the problems with more silver bullet “solutions”... and the cycle continues.

The innovation offered by Revolutionary Schools is to break the cycle. We provide a scalable process that balances high levels of teacher autonomy with high levels of teacher accountability. We have learned the hard way that this kind of revolution is not for the faint of heart. It takes a tremendous amount of courage and coordination for school board members and district administrators to “stay the course” and sign on to a long-term, sustainable approach. For districts that are ready, the positive results can be seen within the first year. Unfortunately, silver bullets are hard to resist and the big picture hasn’t been readily evident to all school leaders...

PART A:

It was early April when my phone rang. A curriculum coordinator from upstate had heard about my work in another school system. I listened for ten minutes as she went on about the merits of such systemic efforts. In fact, it was exactly what they were looking for: true teacher accountability; rapid, detailed curriculum alignment across classrooms, grade levels, textbook series, and schools; and an efficient approach that capitalized on the collective wisdom of their teachers.

She explained that the district was four years into a traditional curriculum mapping initiative that was now floundering. A new superintendent had just come on board from a neighboring state. He had many wonderful ideas and, in fact, had already begun rolling out a number of district-wide initiatives. Fully informed of her convictions, I stopped her: “Two quick questions: Is the admin team on board? And what is your timeframe?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, she cheerily replied, “Oh, the superintendent already had me copy and distribute all of your materials, and we’d love it if you’d do a big kick off speech for us in two weeks. As for the admin team, don’t worry about them. They never like anything, but they’ll come around.”

My jaw dropped...literally. Her response was breathtakingly incongruent with everything Revolutionary Schools represents. The process depends upon the unwavering support of the leadership team. What is more, systemic change is not something you can just photocopy and cheer on. I assumed she had me mistaken for another consultant, but I probed further.

Yes, she had obtained, photocopied, and distributed to each of her teachers over one hundred copyrighted pages of a highly detailed, coordinated language arts curriculum. She failed to understand, however, that those pages reflected a confidential game plan created by all of the teachers in *another school system* in their first year of facing *their own* unique set of challenges. When I informed her of these facts, the curriculum coordinator apologized profusely. She assured me they really were committed to the process. They would work with me to create a plan of their own. All she needed was an invoice from me.

Light years from preparing an invoice, I asked to set up a phone conference with the leadership team for two days later. If, after careful consideration, they were ready to unanimously commit their support, time, and resources toward supporting their teachers through the process, we could start thinking about the best way to move forward.

With a sense of foreboding, I phoned their central office. The curriculum coordinator explained that the entire leadership team had yet to arrive, and one principal was sick. We made small talk while I listened for the arrival of the remaining administrators. After fifteen minutes the curriculum coordinator and a principal concurred, “We’re ready to get started.” Over the chorus of keystrokes, footsteps, and doors creaking on their end, I spent about twenty minutes reviewing with them a PowerPoint of the entire process.

Every so often the curriculum coordinator would sing the praises of a specific component. A principal – the same principal each time – would interject a “Wow” or “We could really use that.” About thirty minutes into the call, the superintendent introduced himself and explained that his district faced some real challenges. The call was timely because they could really use our help. His district “was different” than the other districts we worked with, he explained. During their four years of curriculum mapping they had already done all the work I was talking about. The documentation I used was just what he was looking for to tie it all together. The teachers were excited to get the unambiguous instructional contracts. It was clear to him that the district was ready for the culminating roll-out.



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PART B:

I took a deep breath and explained that, in fact, *they had not done the work*. The curriculum coordinator had distributed the work completed by another school district. It would be of no use to his teachers. I described the ways in which investment in *the process* is what ultimately transforms school systems. Hearing nothing on the other end of the line, I asked, “Is this making sense?” The curriculum coordinator cleared her throat: “Umm...he’s gone, but he gave a thumbs-up on getting an invoice from you for the roll-out speech.”

It was quite evident to the remaining administrative team members that I would not be delivering a culminating roll-out speech, where there was nothing to “culminate” or “roll out”. Out of curiosity, I asked the group what initiatives were already underway in the district . The team listed **twenty-six**....and I wished them all the best.