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Lessons From Down Under

By NANCY WALSER

Sometimes I like to take a break from the ongoing food fight over test scores and AYP and ponder what education might look like without American-style reforms.

The perfect opportunity presented itself the other day when two high-level education officials from Victoria, Australia, came to talk to doctoral students at Harvard Graduate School of Education about their own experiences with reform. All in all, their system, which began in 2003, could not be more different from our own.

Here are a few things that stand out:

1. *Victoria's reform is centered on workforce development, rather than innovation or a "race."* Deputy education secretary Darrell Fraser—a former high school principal who clearly relishes the challenge of his job—says student retention rates of over 30 percent in some Victoria high schools made officials come to grips with large variations in skill and motivation levels among practitioners, and resulted in the current reform effort known as ["The Blueprint."](#)

"The reality was that most of the people in our workforce did not understand how humans learn . . . and could not describe what quality instruction looked like," he said. After allowing a certain number of teachers to "leave with dignity," officials made a conscious decision to invest in the education of adults as well as students. All 1,600 principals now convene once a year for ["The Big Day Out"](#) featuring "structured readings" of research. Principals are eligible for \$10,000 study grants and teachers can take 20–50 days of paid leave to tackle specific "challenges."

2. *Money is not a problem.* A [stimulus package](#), announced in February, has brought an unprecedented level of discretionary resources to Victoria for new school facilities as well as for instructional supports such as literacy and numeracy coaches. "The resources are incomprehensible," said Fraser.
3. *Reforms appear to have broad support.* The central reform strategies embodied in the Blueprint came about with input from practitioners working in a series of roundtables. Authors of a 2007 [case study](#) on Victoria noted "a common ownership of the Blueprint agenda." (The only potential fly in the ointment is some resistance to the government's concurrent plan to close or merge small schools.)
4. *Relationship building and leadership development are not just slogans.* A "toxic" political environment that had once existed between principals and central administrators has been replaced by a culture of collegiality, said Fraser, remembering how in the first year, principals sat in meetings with their arms crossed. What has most surprised him about the Victoria reforms is how quickly principals got on board, he said. (There are no local school districts in Victoria, however, 70 "network leaders" are assigned to assist and evaluate 20-25 principals each.)
5. *Collaboration is modeled from the top.* "The minister of education [[Bronwyn Pike](#)] actually comes to our professional learning forums," said Judy Petch, general manager of school improvement. "Normally, if you know a minister is coming to an event, you groan because of all the paperwork that has to be done, the

speeches that have to be written, but she's very no nonsense. She says, 'I don't want any fanfare; I don't want to speak; I just want to join in the conversation. I have to learn with you by attending.' We couldn't keep her away."

6. *There is no such thing as AYP.* School improvement is a [four-year process](#) beginning with self-evaluation and goal setting. It ends with a visit from an outside reviewer. Progress is measured against goals set at the school level and results from similar schools. There are three types of school reviews depending on whether student outcomes are at the expected level, better, or worse.
7. *School quality is measured in multiple ways.* In stark contrast to the annual public vetting of test-score results seen on this side of the Pacific, school improvement in Victoria is measured by a slew of indicators, reported out by box and whisker graphs that easily convey performance over time. Indicators include scores on state and national tests, but also survey responses from students, teachers, and principals, as well as information on where students go after graduation.

So how is this all working out for the students of Victoria? According to a very glossy "white album" published in 2007 by the government, there has been continuous progress since 2003, particularly in early literacy, primary and secondary reading; teachers' perceptions of school morale; and students' perceptions of their own motivation to learn.

Harvard professor [Richard Elmore](#), who introduced the officials and who has consulted in Victoria for five years, said he feels he's in "a parallel universe" when he's at work Down Under. Apparently, the reverse is also true. Petch and Fraser were asked what has surprised them the most on their U.S. visit.

"The sense that teachers are dispensable," replied Fraser, pointing to a [recent New York Times article](#) chronicling teacher layoffs and disruptions despite the U.S.-style stimulus. Also disorienting: all the programs and grant writing that educators must do for relatively small pots of money that might only last a year or two. "That's not the core work that you want educators to be involved with," he said.

"There's a lot of noise in your environment, and powerful points of view," noted Petch, referencing, in particular, all the foundations wanting to invest in a myriad of programs dear to their hearts. "We don't have that much noise in our own environment; our greatest challenge is to try to maintain the consistency of message within the bureaucracy."

Victoria is on its second set of Blueprint reforms; U.S. lawmakers have yet to reauthorize NCLB, which predates the Blueprint by two years. It will be interesting to see what happens with these two very different approaches to reform.

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