

# Coaching Whole School Change: Lessons In Practice From a Small High School

Book Review by Peggy Silva, New Hampshire

David Allen and his colleagues have done much to demystify the concept of school coaching with their new book, *Coaching Whole School Change, Lessons in Practice from a Small High School*, published in 2008 by Teachers College Press. This book evolved from a pilot study on school coaching at New York City's Park East High School as it transitioned from an alternative school to a four-year high school. The early stages of this transition focused on school safety and shifting roles within the school, but it also became apparent that there was little consistency of instruction and insufficient focus on complex thinking and/or extended reading and writing. A new principal built on an already-existing relationship with the Institute for Student Achievement (ISA) by accepting Suzanne Ort, who had recently completed her doctorate at Columbia, to be Park East's part-time coach.

Allen tracks Suzy's interactions at the school over two years. Suzy is an inside-outside coach, working first one day, then two days each week at Park East. Allen and his writing colleagues observe Suzy's work in order to extract the habits of an effective school coach. Their goal is not to write a comprehensive account of school coaching or of a specific school's work, but to "illuminate the nature of coaching practice." Allen states that, "Coaching is not only complex, but intensely context-bound." Suzy keeps her eye on the long-term goals of elevating discourse, improving teacher collaboration, and deepening instruction through her constant communication with a wide range of school practitioners. Often these communications take place in hallways or in "drive-by" moments of post-it note exchanges; at other times, Suzy is shown collaborating with individuals, connecting colleagues and assisting in the facilitation of school committees. She participates in meetings, acknowledges human barriers to change and forges onward. Her days are varied, as she seizes small moments to create opportunities to boost teachers' good intentions. Suzy spends time enhancing curriculum, solving problems, easing burdens, supporting teachers, providing tips and

offering a new perspective on teaching and learning. No one moment is magic or transformative, but each successful encounter slowly shifts the school's focus.

As in any complex social system, Park East experiences administrative shifts, diminishing resources and a range of social politics. Allen keeps his lens focused sharply on Suzy's emerging coaching habits, in spite of typical distractions. He provides administrators, teachers and organizations with a template of how to build a collaborative school culture through the dedicated time of one individual charged with building positive connections that transform daily practice. Through an

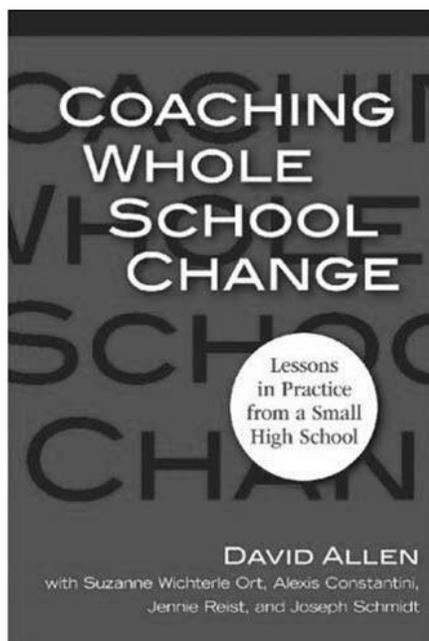
extended study of one coach from multiple perspectives and multiple roles, Allen provides a research methodology for analyzing the complexity of coaching.

As an internal school literacy and writing coach, I found tremendous value in reading this study. District colleagues who hold similar positions in their schools often feel pressured to define exactly what a coach is/does on a minute by minute basis in a typical school day. A mere listing of daily time spent does not provide a thoughtful overview of the complexity of the work nor the small increments of change embedded in every collaboration. Allen's study of Suzy's interactions demonstrates that the definition of a school coach includes elements of cheerleading,

problem-solving, facilitation, making connections, sharing strengths, clarifying, pushing, empathizing, setting achievable targets, nailing down the details, making agendas, persevering, celebrating success, closing gaps, identifying future goals and noting the work of others. This last point is a significant one. Suzy thanks a teacher for her work in the school-wide Thanksgiving feast. The teacher replies that such an expression of appreciation is something never offered by other staff members after events. A simple acknowledgement and thank you made a colleague feel valued for her effort.

Readers see the slow but steady progress towards the transformation of a school

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into a professional learning community. Allen ends this study with the statement that, "Extraordinary coaches come in all kinds of 'personality packages' but will be unified by their tenacious commitment to the individual growth of the individual teachers and administrators with whom they work, as well as the development of the professional community and school community that those people create and re-create every day."

The Appendix of this text outlines the structure of the ISA, a model that many schools will seek to emulate in their own change processes.

I will recommend this text to my school and district administrators. The study of the complexities of the coaching model will both alleviate tensions and offer a new lens through which to view the many strands of human interactions that contribute to building a positive school climate. ■

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### Correction

In the Winter 2009 issue of *Connections*, we mistakenly credited the article "Center of Activity Report: San Antonio" to Ileana Liberatore. The author, in fact, was Patricia Norman. We apologize for the error.

## Center of Activity Report... *(continued from page 7)*

made to offer a new coaches institute this summer and possibly another retreat for the leaders in the area. The local support groups for the CFG's in the region's schools continue, and we hope they will expand to more schools as other institutions observe our successes. ■

### Reference:

- Palmer, Parker, (1998) *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teachers' Life*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

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