Upstream Collaborative is a ‘community of practice’ network of alternative education schools in California and Washington. Its aim is to redesign alternative schools for equity, to transform the learning experiences of students, and to work with school leaders and staffs in implementing new programs and practices to create a school culture based on the centrality of rigor, relevance and relationships.

Upstream Collaborative started its work with 11 schools in California. As of June 2019, the network had expanded into the state of Washington with the involvement of 10 schools and increased to 18 schools in California. For the 2019-20 school year, Upstream Collaborative has grown to 35 schools – 21 in CA and 14 in WA. The alternative schools that form the network vary from Continuation Schools, who generally serve youth in grades 10-12 who have fallen behind in credits for various reasons to Court Schools, serving school-aged children and youth residing in court-supervised programs, to Community Schools whose purpose is to retain students who are at-risk of dropping out of school, to other forms and types of alternative education.

Led by Big Picture Learning (BPL), Upstream Collaborative is supported by the Stuart Foundation to provide education, training, and support to schools. BPL staff interact, train, and assist school staffs to implement ‘best practices’ and to address problems. They provide follow-up support with regular calls and through the organisation of school district leader meetings. The Stuart Foundation has recognized the success and growth of Upstream Collaborative in how they have improved alternative schooling through developing leadership, delivering bespoke professional development and expanding its communities of practice. The Stuart Foundation wants this research to assist in learning how this success has been achieved by Upstream Collaborative, so the lessons can be built upon and disseminated.

The vision of Upstream Collaborative is to create schools where students, who historically have not done well academically, will flourish, are honored and valued, and have opportunities to pursue their interests and talents. Many of these students had previously been identified as at-risk of school failure or dropping out. A large majority of students enrolled in alternative education programs receive an inferior education having already not been served well by mainstream education. In general, the common instructional practices fail to identify and cultivate the interests and talents of students. As a consequence, students are further marginalized and effectively punished for having had or for living volatile lives.

McInerney and McKlindon of the Education Law Center in Washington (2014) advise that, “Trauma-informed approaches are (based on) the belief that students’ actions are a direct result of their experiences, and when students act out or disengage, the question we should ask is not ‘what is wrong with you’, but rather ‘what happened to you? By being sensitive to students’ past and current experiences with trauma, educators can break the cycle of trauma, prevent re-traumatization, and engage a child in learning and finding success in school”. Upstream Collaborative is passionate about equity and it is this vision and purpose which are guiding the work of the coaches.
BPL and Upstream Collaborative are focusing on an asset-based approach which is founded on the belief that every student has interests and passions that need space to develop. They actively oppose a deficit mind-set, and are committed to serve low-income and diverse students and communities. Most of the Upstream Collaborative schools have become or are redesigning themselves based on BPL principles. They see that viable pathways do exist for students whose credit deficiencies would deter participation in a traditional school. Moreover, they believe that innovative approaches to learning, relationships, truancy and discipline are components of a committed approach that is needed to retain and serve students who have been disadvantaged by the school system.

Upstream Collaborative has been successful in its work, and the focus of this research is on capturing the learning and identifying lessons in order to highlight best practices in professional development, school leadership, and change management, and to set the work within the wider context of alternative educational provision. The objectives of the research are three-fold.

1. To identify and analyse the lessons that have been learned by Upstream Collaborative in leading change in alternative education, to specify the ‘how to’ of the work, to show what conditions are needed to support and sustain these changes, and to outline anticipated changes that will come as a result of adopting BPL approaches.

2. To describe and assess the professional and leadership development provided by Upstream Collaborative, highlighting how it facilitates change management and impacts on achieving learning goals.

3. To recommend how to transcribe BPL and Upstream Collaborative approaches in order to share their learning and success with the field and make their work more relatable to policy makers and those in mainstream education.
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research sample involved Students, Principals, Advisors, Learning Through Internship (LTI) Co-ordinators, Parents, school Support Staff, Mentors, school District officials, Upstream Collaborative Coaches, the two Executive Directors of BPL and some BPL Regional Directors. A review of literature was conducted on US and international insights into alternative education as well as research focused on educational change and policy recommendations for alternative schooling.

In conducting a study of this type, the research design relies on qualitative methods of investigation. Such an approach is necessary to gain an insight into the perceptions, experiences and understandings of the people connected to Upstream Collaborative, so that an assessment of the learning can be made of how effective Upstream has been in working with the schools, facilitating change, developing leaders and transforming practices to meet learning goals.

The research techniques selected for the study (open-ended, semi-structured interviews and focus groups) are flexible and sensitive to the range of interviewees who took part in this study. They provided the data necessary to meet the objectives and established a reliable basis for advancing recommendations.

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews consist of a series of general questions designed to cover the same areas in each interview while allowing scope for the interviewer to explore respondents’ experiences, ideas and viewpoints. The approach makes it possible to ask additional questions based on responses and for topics and concerns to be dealt with in-depth.

Focus groups require a minimum of two interviewees, usually involve three to five people but can be carried out with up to eight participants. These were conducted with students and advisors/teachers. The purpose of these groups was to engage people with similar experiences in discussing their views and perceptions. The questions that were explored in focus groups were designed from the interview data in order to be most relevant, and they address certain views or trends that have emerged, allowing for them to be explored, confirmed or modified through discussion.

There was recurrent data collection and analysis both from the ongoing meetings the researcher had with the Upstream coaches as well as from the data collected and reported on by the regional directors, school coaches and school leaders. Regular on-line meetings were recorded and contributed to a compendium of insights and perspectives on the work, approach, rationale and progress of the network.

The research methodology and ethical considerations were guided primarily by Ayers (2008), Cohen and Manion (1994), Hammarberg et. al. (2016), Morrow (2001) and Torrance (2010). Interviews were carried out in person and through on-line conference calls. Focus groups were done face-to-face. The research was designed to be of direct value to participants themselves, allowing them time to reflect upon and to share their experiences of the work of Upstream Collaborative and BPL. Towards the end of the research process, a series of
questions were distributed to Principals to confirm the findings further and to test trends and conclusions arising from the interviews, focus groups and regular meetings.

In addition to the more formal interviews and focus groups, the researcher had the opportunity to engage with Upstream Collaborative principals, teachers/advisors, LTI co-ordinators and students who gathered at a conference to share progress and challenges on their work in re-designing their school programs. The researcher facilitated a session focused on clarifying the pace, process and attention to culture required to improve schooling for learners. In other sessions, the researcher connected more experienced Upstream school leaders with those who had recently embarked on the journey, and was able to listen in on their encounters.

The contributions from the research sample provided that data necessary to apprise and appreciate the work of Upstream Collaborative and identify the key lessons that have been learned to date. The methodology has allowed an in-depth and expansive picture of Upstream Collaborative to emerge. The findings shed light on its strengths and will inform and guide how the network can be expanded to other schools and districts.

For other schools wanting to re-design their programs, the findings will help to demonstrate how this can be done practically while emphasizing innovative aspects and the importance of personalization rather than replication. The analysis of the data in this study will also show how the work of Upstream Collaborative relates to and contributes to the wider national and international movement of BPL, highlighting the importance of using a ‘community of practice’ approach while consistently applying the principles of BPL to all the coaching and professional development work that is required.

In total, over 120 people participated directly in this study. It is worthwhile noting that the research process with the respondents across the Upstream network conveyed an evident excitement, dynamism, sense of purpose and urgency, passion, commitment, connected-ness and vitality for the work and the process of re-designing and transforming their schools.

Of the sample, six Super- or Assistant Superintendents were interviewed, and there were 16 principals and 10 other school leaders (i.e. teachers and co-ordinators) who participated in one-to-one interviews. As part of the overall research process, students (individually, in pairs and in groups) were interviewed (46), teachers, advisors and LTI co-ordinators participated (23), as did parents (5), internship mentors (4) and other school support staff (9). Ten principals, three of whom were not interviewed, completed detailed responses to the follow-up research questions. There were online interviews with BPL staff (4) and all of the members of Upstream Collaborative team (6) as well as regular meetings.
The first task in most studies is to define the terms so there is clarity and consistency in the discussion in order to provide for a coherent argument and sound conclusions. An understanding of ‘alternative education’ and of ‘alternative schools’ will be put forward, but the purpose of this is not so much to arrive at a specific determination of the terminology but rather to indicate the variety of understandings that are in the literature and to show how diverse and wide-ranging alternative education and schooling is in the United States and internationally.

An ‘alternative’ is something that is available as another option or choice, or simply something that differs from the established or traditional way of doing something. It can refer to something that challenges the traditional norms. An alternative implies different ways, different styles or structures, a different environment, something related to but distinct from. Any alternative is something different. In general, an alternative does not have to be opposed to the traditional norm; however, it can be and it may exist in order to challenge or change what is the established way in an attempt to create a new way or system.

In regard to alternative education, the concept is used rather indiscriminately, covering any project or initiative that seeks to implement or adopt a different arrangement for teaching and learning. Magadley, et. al. (2019) state: “there is still no commonly accepted definition of alternative education frameworks, and the constantly evolving nature of alternative schools and the rules that govern them have made them something of a moving target and difficult to define (Lange and Sletten, 2002). Generally, educators and researchers agree that the term refers to educational approaches that differ from traditional state-provided mainstream education (e.g. Carnie, 2003; Foley and Pang, 2006)”.

Porowski et. al. (2014) broadly define alternative education programs, “as educational activities that fall outside the traditional K–12 curriculum - frequently serve students who are at risk of school failure”. They go on to say that, “Because individual states or school districts define and determine the features of their alternative education programs, programs may differ in key characteristics, such as target population, setting, services, and structure”.

What Porowski does not mention is that many school systems do not define alternative education or schooling but describe aspects of it, its purpose or how it relates to the mainstream educational system. The California Department of Education offers the following understanding. “The purpose of alternative schools and programs of choice is to provide different means of achieving grade-level standards and meeting students’ needs. ... These schools and programs are often characterized by responsiveness to learning and instructional style differences and small unit size. The effective use of such instructional strategies as independent study, community-based education, focused or thematic education, and flexible scheduling increases attendance and improves performance”.

In the state of Washington, the term Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) is used for alternative education and it is understood simply as, “public education where some or all of the instruction is delivered outside of a regular classroom schedule. ALE follows all public education requirements”. In New Jersey, for a different example, its Department of Education
defines alternative education as, “a non-traditional environment that addresses the individual learning styles and needs of disruptive or disaffected students at risk of school failure or mandated for removal from general education”.

The National Center for Education Statistics in the US distinguishes alternative schools as “usually housed in a separate facility where students are removed from regular schools” from alternative programs that are “usually housed within regular schools”. The US Department of Education understands alternative educations as, “a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education” (U.S. Department of Education 2002, 14).

Hoppers (2005) distinguishes four different categories of alternative schools in his work on alternative education in Africa.

(1) alternatives as a variation for providing the same content as in regular public education for the purpose of equivalent learning outcomes, but by different modes of delivery (such as distance education, part-time education or home/self study); (2) alternatives as providing an adaptation of regular public education in terms not only of mode of delivery, but also of curriculum and pedagogical practices, and thus of anticipated learning outcomes; (3) alternatives as practices of transformation, aiming at personal and community empowerment, thus promoting learning experiences and outcomes which are in fundamental ways antagonistic to those prevailing in the regular system; and (4) alternatives as different forms of enculturation, constituting other ‘learning systems’ associated with socio-cultural or religious traditions.

In Hopper’s third category, the emphasis shifts towards redefining or re-conceptualizing the very notion of schooling and how it impacts upon learners and their community. This understanding appears to be closest to that of the work and focus of Upstream Collaborative, and it captures that aspect of ‘alternative’ as ‘something that challenges the traditional norms or system’.

Alternative schools in Palestinian-Arab communities in Israel are characterized by a commitment to educational change, the creation of democratic structures, cooperative learning between students and teachers, and a learning community that acknowledges each student’s unique gifts and skills with a shared view that each student has the right to his/her own self-expression (Kizel, 2012). The features of alternative schools in these communities are that they have small classroom sizes, optimize one-on-one interaction and strong relationships between students and teachers, make the curriculum relevant to students’ interests, have flexibility with the timetable and enable student decision-making (Lange and Sletten, 2002).

Magadley, et. al. (2019) suggest that the rationale for establishing alternative schools in Palestinian-Arab Israel is “because they were discontented with the mainstream education arrangements and the state of public education in their cities. They deemed the state-mandated curriculum in Palestinian-Arab schools as traditional, outdated, suppressive of creativity, and excessively focused on academic achievement and testing at the expense of developing students’ character (e.g. Dahan and Yonah, 2006)”.
Thompson (2001), writing about non-formal and alternative education in several African countries, states:

(The current forms of alternative approaches are firstly, the direct results of the dysfunction of a de-culturated mainstream formal education; secondly, the desire of communities and groups to decide what and how their children must learn; thirdly, the developments at the regional and global levels (e.g. Education for All Initiative) … which have implications for education and lastly, the impact of educational philosophical thoughts. … Non-formal education and alternative approaches to basic education have gained prominence on the change agenda due in part to the inadequacies and problematic of the formal education system which manifest themselves in low levels of both the internal and external efficiency of the system, high rates of dropout, low rates of persistence, didactic methodology and questionable learning achievement.

There has been a marked increase in the number and spread of alternative schools in Israel and a number of African countries, and the review of literature shows that this is also the case in The Philippines, in many South American countries and in Europe. This is a global phenomenon and trend, and what is interesting, as can be seen in the above quotations, is that the rationale for the emergence and development of alternative schools is broadly similar. That is to say, mainstream or traditional schooling is widely recognized as being unable to cater to the needs of a growing number of its students. What is perhaps even more surprising and indeed encouraging is that researchers from around the globe are identifying alternative education not just as an alternative to mainstream education for students who do not fit in or are not served by the system, but as models and approaches for the mainstream that are showing the way how to transform teaching and learning.
The growth in alternative schools is apparent in most countries. Hoppers (2005) analysis of alternative schools in Africa asserts: “All (alternative schools) in this sample experienced a relatively spectacular growth during the second half of the 1990s. As a result, they provide an educational experience to substantial number of young people around the continent”. Kleiner et. al. (2002) found across the United States between the school years 1993-1994 and 1997-1998, there was a remarkable 47% increase in alternative schools and programs. At present, in California alone, the number of students in alternative education provision has reached 200,000; in Washington it is approximately 40,000.

The principles, practices and approaches of many alternative schools share many similarities. Before presenting some of the distinct design features that Upstream Collaborative is introducing and helping to implement in alternative schools in Washington and California, here is a description of alternative, non-formal education in the Philippines by Figueredo and Anzalone (2003).

It is highly flexible, with learning sessions and program participation beginning and ending based on the needs of the learner. … Class projects are especially developed … Students are assigned instructional managers to help them design ‘individual learning plans’ based on their learning needs and goals. Students then meet periodically with their instructional manager to assess their progress … The curriculum allows students ample flexibility in choosing the quantity and subject matter of their courses. The curriculum is meant to cover a set of competencies … and follows the Four Pillars of Learning (learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together). The skills and competencies developed through the curriculum fall within five major categories: 1) communication skills, 2) problem solving and critical thinking, 3) sustainable use of resources/productivity, 4) self-development and sense of community, and 5) expanding one’s world vision.
REDESIGN PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

The BPL principles and practices are often referred to as the 10 Distinguishers and share certain similarities to the practices outlined in the Philippines. They are:

**ONE-STUDENT-AT-A-TIME** - The entire learning experience is personalized to each student’s interests, talents and needs. Personalization expands beyond mere academic work and involves looking at each student holistically.

**ADVISORY STRUCTURE** - Advisory is the core organizational and relational structure of a Big Picture Learning school, its heart and soul, often described as a “second family” by students. Students stay with an advisor and a group of fellow classmates, building close personal relationships.

**LEARNING THROUGH INTERESTS AND INTERNSHIPS (LTIs)** - Real world learning is best accomplished in the real world. Big Picture students intern - often twice a week for an entire school day - with experts in their field of interest, completing authentic projects and gaining experience and exposure to how their interests intersect with the real world.

**PARENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT** - Parents are welcome and valued members of the school community and play a proactive role in their children’s learning, collaborating in the planning and assessment of student work. They use their assets to support the work of the school, and often play an integral role in building relationships with potential LTI mentors.

**SCHOOL CULTURE** - In Big Picture schools, there is palpable trust, respect and equality between and among students and adults. Students take leadership roles in the school, and teamwork defines the adult culture. Student voice is valued in the school decision making process and visitors are struck by the ease with which students interact with adults.

**AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT** - Students are assessed not by tests, but by public displays of learning that track growth and progress in the student’s area of interest. Assessment criteria are individualized to the student and the real world standards of a project. Students present multiple exhibitions each year and discuss their learning growth with staff, parents, peers, and mentors.

**SCHOOL ORGANIZATION** - Schools are organized around a culture of collaboration and communication. They are not bound by the structures of buildings, schedules, bells, or calendars. There is an interdependence between school and community.

**LEADERSHIP** - Leadership is shared and spread between a strong, visionary principal; a dedicated, responsible team of advisors and other staff; and students. The community functions as a democracy. A pervasive sense of shared ownership drives a positive culture dedicated to ongoing improvement.
POST-SECONDARY PLANNING - Students develop plans that contribute to their future success - be it through college, trades, schools, travel, the military, or the workforce.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT - Regular advisor PD is conducted at each school by principals, other school staff, and Big Picture Learning staff and coaches. A Big Picture School is a community of lifelong learners who embrace continuous improvement.

Upstream Collaborative is primarily concerned with addressing equity and assisting in the redesign of alternative schools through coaching, professional development (PD) and introducing various guiding principles and educational practices, most of which have been developed and implemented in BPL schools. To be clear, some of the Upstream Collaborative schools are BPL schools, some are moving in that direction, some have just started their redesign and some are just adopting some of the distinguishers as they redesign their program. All the schools in Washington who are part of Upstream are basing their design on BPL, whereas this is not the case for all of the California schools. Nevertheless, every school in the Upstream Collaborative network is influenced by the principle of ‘one-student-at-a-time’ and is redesigning in one form or another around student interests and more engaged learning.

Another factor to bear in mind is that two of the Upstream Schools are Juvenile Detention Centers for incarcerated youth in the criminal justice system. They are even more distinctive than the other alternative schools and by their nature are dealing with an unpredictably transient school population. Another obvious distinction is that students cannot leave the building. Many of the other Upstream schools are working with young people for short and uncertain periods of time and nearly all have students who have come to them from other schools or centers, usually having had a fragmented and largely negative experience of schooling. The profile of students many of whom live volatile lives and have had negative school experiences highlights the need for a personalized approach.

It could be argued that the first BPL distinguisher, ‘one-student-at-a-time’, is both the most important and comprises or entails the rest. This principle, this approach to schooling, this way of educating, transforms the experience of every student; by extension, this means it transforms the role of teachers, principals and school staffs, and the view of the role and involvement of parents. It leads to learning opportunities outside of the school building, new and different ways to measure success and assess learning, flexible and adaptive scheduling, potential re-design of school buildings, and different ways of funding education, relating to communities and connecting with other schools and educational sectors.

A principal, in one of the Upstream Collaborative schools shared this experience – “We re-evaluated the idea of one-student-at-a-time,’ and began giving our students more flexibility with their school attendance, number of days and types of non-paid versus paid internships they had to have. These changes in the spring semester caused our enrollment to grow again, and it ultimately crystalized some major best practices we want to carry forward while also informing us of the practices we should leave behind”.

A coach from Upstream said, “with one-student-at-a-time, it creates a commonality; they all sense how much better things could be if you get to the students’ interests and it changes how they do things, how they see things”.
Elliot Washor, the co-founder of BPL, advises that one of the most important things to do in school is ‘pay attention to who is in front of you’. This comment presumes the importance of getting to know each learner, who they are, where they are from, what they are interested in, what they are good at, who they know, what makes them tick, what is happening in their lives and how best they can be supported with their learning. It means that they should have a personal curriculum based around their needs, interests and passions and that they will be supported to pursue their learning in school and out of school (doing projects, participating in internships, engaging with their community, interacting with a wide range of adults, attending events, taking trips and so on).

A central BPL principle has been that education needs to be personalized around the interests and needs of each student; however, care must be taken in using ‘personalized learning’ because it has become an inconsistently and loosely used term in education. It has also been co-opted by a number of companies in the ‘tech industry’ to sell packages to schools and districts to cater for students in a personalized way. EdWeek (2017) confirms that there is a lack of clarity on what ‘personalized learning’ means. “In practice, though, “personalized learning” is used to describe everything from supplemental software programs to whole-school redesigns As a result, the term has become a blank slate on to which supporters and skeptics alike project their own hopes, fears, and beliefs”.

A joint document by ExcelinEd and Educational Elements written in June 2019 echoed the EdWeek piece saying that the main challenge facing ‘personalized learning’ is that there is no agreement on a definition. They add that people do not even know if ‘personalized learning’ is a noun or a verb, and they wonder if it should be defined at all. The problem with most definitions, approaches and understandings of ‘personalized learning’ is it has to do primarily with adults ‘doing’ the personalizing, the tailoring and the customizing.

Personalizing can just mean being considerate of a person and taking some time to offer something that is likely to make the person happy or interested. A personalized greeting card is simply one that has the person's name in it. A personalized card might be appreciated in the same way that students might appreciate a school experience that connects with one of their interests. This really is the minimum of ‘personalization’. Things are not the same when something is ‘done for’ a person as opposed to that person directing and being meaningfully involved. When something is personal, it deeply concerns a person, like when something is ‘taken personal’; there is feeling and it matters because of who the person is and what he/she cares about.

A personal curriculum is not students doing whatever they want – when, where and how they want to – and only doing what they care about; rather, it is each student with people who know her/him well (for example, a parent, advisor and mentor), shaping and designing a program of studies with a learning plan and goals that are based around the student’s interests, needs and passions. Every personal curriculum will be different when it is personal. This is not to dismiss ‘personalized learning’ which is often a significant improvement to a compulsory curriculum, but most Upstream schools are working on the basis of one-student-at-a-time and this makes and keeps the program personal with student interests driving the learning.

Student-driven learning is a preferable conception to that of student-centered learning, because, like with personalized learning, ‘student-centered’ as a term lacks clarity, and
educators tend to have widely different understandings of it. In many cases, student-centered just means a group of adults placing the perceived needs of the student in the center and then telling her what to do. Teachers can make students the center of their attention but take little account of what they are interested in and presume that they know what they need. Student-driven learning, on the other hand, seems to capture the principle that it is the student’s interests and needs that shape their personal curriculum and their school experiences NOT limited, uninformed perceptions, external requirements, or compulsory subjects.

Several advisors who were interviewed said that they need to keep reminding themselves that ‘it’s one-student-at-a-time’ and not get too caught up in concerns, such as, ‘catching up with credits’, ‘graduating on time’, ‘passing tests’ or even ‘getting kids into an internship’. A principal and an advisor working in the same school explained about a student who did not have his first internship for over a year and a half, because they all knew that he needed that amount of time to build up his confidence. If they would have ‘forced’ him into an internship earlier, when he wasn’t ready, it ‘would have been a disaster’. It is personalized best when it is personal.

The findings show that ‘one-student-at-a-time’ is a principle that can be usefully applied to all aspects of implementing the BPL design and redesigning alternative schools; the process should be personalized and personal across the board. In other words, it should be one school, one district at a time, one principal, one advisor at a time, one parent, one mentor at a time. It seems to be the case in every case that when this kind of personalization is overlooked, then more difficulties arise, and people are not as fully involved or committed as they might otherwise be.

When a school embraces ‘one-student-at-a-time’, nearly everything else can stem from it. It informs how, what and with whom other practices and approaches are used, and it gives the explanation for why things are done the way they are. In other words, it provides an insight into the school culture.
LISTENING AND LEARNING

CULTURE

In essence, what Upstream Collaborative is setting out to do is to change the culture of alternative schools in California and Washington and beyond. The literature on ‘school improvement’ and ‘school reform’ consistently refer to culture in one way or another as the key. This makes sense when culture is understood the way the term is defined in anthropology as ‘the habits, customs, ideas, values, and behaviors of a particular group of people’ which could also be expressed informally as ‘the way we do things around here’. The research literature makes it clear that changing school culture should be the main focus to achieve school improvement. If there is no change in ‘the way we do things around here’, then it is very likely that ‘things’ are going to stay largely the same. Seymour Sarason (1998) advises, “If you attempt to implement reforms but fail to engage the culture of a school, nothing will change.”

The aims of Upstream Collaborative are to redesign alternative schools for equity, to learn about the process of reshaping schools, to help implement new programs and practices, and thereby to transform the learning experiences of students. What the coaches in Upstream have learned is that the process of reshaping schools involves engaging with the culture of the school. Therefore, to redesign and improve schools, the approach has to be ‘one-school-at-a-time’. No matter how innovative or how much money is spent or how much support there is or how charismatic the principal is, if the culture is not addressed, nothing sustainable will happen.

The culture of any school is expressed in its behaviors, priorities, routines and structures. The challenge is that because culture is what is done all the time, it can be difficult to notice it or to accept that the usual way of doing things may not be the right way or that there is another way that is better. When a school engages in cultural change, there will nearly always be resistance to it, even active opposition. Cultural change involves uncertainty and there can be a lack of trust in a new way of doing things. When difficulties and problems arise, there will normally be a default or a reflex back to doing things the way they have been done and in the ways that people are used to doing them. This often means, in the words of one principal, “reverting to the predominant culture of schooling – command and control”.

Another aspect of culture change is that there is frequently some fall-out and hardship. A number of Upstream schools that have been engaged in a redesign have experienced changes in staff and with people who did not understand or could not accept what was being done. This can be difficult; however, several coaches, principals and BPL staff commented that “it comes with the territory”.

In 1995, Tyack and Cuban introduced the notion of the ‘grammar of schooling’ which refers to the unquestioned aspects of school, the traditions, rituals and accepted norms. They coined this concept having reviewed over a century of public school reform. “The basic grammar of schooling, like the shape of classrooms, has remained remarkably stable over the decades. Little has changed in the ways that schools divide time and space, classify students and allocate them to classrooms, splinter knowledge into ‘subjects,’ and award grades and ‘credits’ as evidence of learning”. What determines the ‘grammar of schooling’ is the culture.
Tyack and Cuban warn that, “Although the challengers have conducted energetic experiments, for the most part their reforms did not last long. Trying to create major change in one part of the system – a classroom, a school within a school, or even a whole school or district – proved difficult in a broader interdependent system based on the standard grammar”. This truth should not lead to despair but to a recognition that school improvement and reform have to contend with the culture, the grammar of schools, and that culture is dominant, widespread and pervasive. They advise that there are other barriers and obstacles.

One of the directors of Upstream is mostly in favor of an aggressive implementation approach to redesigning schools. He believes that such an approach can combat the dangers of a resistant culture. He also thinks that it can help avoid the selective adoption of aspects of a new way of doing things which will not impinge upon other, stronger aspects of the school design or leads to them not being embedded in the school. He said he believes that, in many cases, the enemy of real progress is little progress.

Such an approach can and will be disruptive, but disruptive change is almost always required to leverage equity and transform practices that would otherwise maintain the status quo. This type of implementation was described by one principal as ‘going all-in’, and he strongly opposed becoming a ‘hybrid’ as he felt and feared that this would not materially affect things and last.

The data from the coaches and the school staffs suggest that cultural change and school change are often slow and meet with many obstacles whether those are external to the school (e.g. compliance to state requirements or expectations of parents), internal to the school (e.g. the school schedule or physical space) or within the mind-sets of staff members (e.g. a deficit mentality or the view that all students have to learn the same stuff at the same time). Not surprisingly, coaches spoke of how much of their work is centered on attending to school culture, acknowledging that this is ‘long-haul’ work. “We have to consider it takes time for students and community to become Big Picture - it’s a cultural change - 3 to 5 years to build this - learning through these mistakes - acknowledging that it’s part of the program - what we’re after is building a live, active culture - culturing culture.” One coach commented that, “this work is quite a challenge given the considerable shifts needed in culture, systems, and structures. And, then there are the principals we need for these schools”.

The challenge is that because changing culture more or less involves changing everything, there can be fierce opposition. This is especially the case if a number of people are happy with the way things are or have an interest in keeping them that way or are just afraid of
change and prefer not to take risks or do not see any other way of doing things or feel that they do not have a role or any power to change things. There may also be the concern or apprehension that if things do change, how will the school fit in to the rest of the system.

This study found that nearly all the schools in Upstream Collaborative are prepared for or are aware of the challenge. They said things such as, they ‘have been waiting for this for a long time’, ‘have been doing a lot of this stuff already but calling it something else’ and ‘have been searching for something different, something that would work and make a real difference to the kids’ lives’. Nevertheless, some people in the schools are hesitant, scared of change, feel ill-equipped or lacking in confidence, though many of these know that ‘change is needed’ and ‘what we have been doing is simply not good enough for the kids’.

No culture is fixed and permanent. In other words, all cultures are dynamic and ‘becoming’ because they are ‘made’ and lived by people who construct them through their relationships with each other. Cultures can and do change, most of the time without too many people noticing but also through deliberate and concerted action. One principal explained that she and the school, “have focused on making the culture shift and getting the message ‘out there’ to the community and parents”. Another principal said, “teachers are really starting to understand how to set goals with kids – not teaching through content. They are letting go of the reins; they allow things and are overcoming the reflex to control”. An advisor saw a ‘turning point’ when the following occurred. “The most powerful shift for students and staff was everyone doing the ‘Who Am I’ project; staff also have been doing that and it just created a whole different vibe”.

Culture change is slow and Upstream schools are at different places in their journey. “We would have to become a new school to be full Big Picture. We are looking to have more flexibility with curriculum but are still a long way off”. “Teachers have been focused on the large projects and getting the internships, but the whole thing is too big for them and the kids – we need to start small”. “I have learned each BPL school is unique – it’s not important to obsess over whether we are BPL because we are not doing this or that. We are doing the stuff but in a way that is in our context and within District requirements”. One district official observed that, “The strongest thing against becoming more like Big Picture is the safety of the current model and system. A lot of teachers are comfortable; that’s probably the biggest obstacle”.

To emphasize the challenge that schools face in reshaping their culture or redesigning their program, one coach discussed ‘back-sliding’, explaining how schools can fall back into the ‘grammar of schooling’ and old habits. He said that he has noticed “a few Big Picture schools that have been around a long time have become less student interest driven and have fallen back to prescribed courses”. Figueredo and Anzalone (2003) warn: “Moreover, efforts to make the curriculum more relevant to the needs and circumstances of audiences that do not find a place in conventional schools also face a dilemma. … In most countries, the formal system, even when its curriculum is acknowledged as lacking relevance to the real world, casts a long shadow on aspirations and expectations. Curriculum developers for alternative models who start down the road to producing a more relevant curriculum are often roped back into traditional subject-matter content as students and parents become more vocal about passing examinations”.
Upstream Collaborative exists to redesign alternative education schools for equity and student success, and to learn about the process of redesigning and implementing alternative education schools and programs. As a community of practice, the Collaborative encompasses over 30 schools across California and Washington classified as ‘alternative’ who are redesigning, supporting, and assessing instructional strategies and school practices that offer students equitable access to deep and sustained learning. Upstream provides education, training, and support to school leaders and their staffs to create new forms of high quality schools and programs that are student-interest driven and asset-based. This work is designed to stimulate the spread of these new forms of alternative education throughout California and Washington to better serve the over two hundred and forty thousand students who are enrolled in alternative schools in the two states.

It is important to state that the Stuart Foundation recognizes that Upstream Collaborative has been doing good work in expanding its communities of practice, delivering PD, fostering leadership and improving alternative schooling; they want to learn how this has been done through the coaching, so the lessons can be shared and expanded. This success does not seem surprising when one listens to the philosophy and principles that guide the coaches, when they describe their approaches, and when one observes how they relate to and learn from each other. In fact, it becomes clear when analyzing the data from principals. “We could not have done any of this without him and her”, “We are limited in PD but I would spend anything additional on more of their coaching”, “His support has been key”, and “All the staff love him; he forces them to expand their thinking”.

In setting out to create a community of practice, the coaches have themselves become a community of practice. From the interviews, interactions and meetings with them, it is apparent that they are a learning community. They are all learning from each other and they are supportive of one another. These relationships have been critical to their success. There is an obvious mutual respect they share, a ‘culture’ of questioning and reflecting, an openness to explore, defend and challenge ideas and approaches, a warm regard for each other, a respect for their respective roles, a humility and a generosity of spirit, a strong sense of shared mission, a sense of urgency balanced with patience and, as mentioned at the start, a passion for equity and seeing students flourish.

Their coaches’ community of practice lives and has deepened not because they think connecting with each would be a good idea, but because they work at it, they are engaged in a shared mission without definite answers and are hungry to pursue equity through their shared work, so they want and need to learn from each other. They want to share ideas, questions, discoveries, breakthroughs, surprises, confusion, interesting articles and links, and what has and has not been working. There is an honesty in their interactions, no pretence that they
have it all figured out, yet there is no false humility – if they did something well, they can admit that and offer it, if it may be of use to someone else.

The interviews show that they all share a commitment to address injustice in education. “I learned IF you sat down with them, you could get a high school kid who was reading at below a 2nd grade level to read books that captured their interest and then they would out-perform everyone in school on standardized tests ... but many still dropped out because they didn’t have the credits to graduate and it would take them something like 8 years; I saw the institutional problem, I had this epiphany about equity - the school would not bend to suit students, and the school needed to change”. Another coach said: “I had a felt sense of injustice and I’m about how to help people who need help the most. I am committed to undoing systems of oppression in a sustainable way. Schooling was and is not the main interest – equity is, and I’m only interested in innovation to promote equity”. A different coach commented: “Upstream is for the kids who need it the most and who get it the least – they tended to get the worst programs, the worst facilities, the worst teachers”.

This heart for equity is not confined to the coaches and directors of Upstream Collaborative. It is explicit and visible in the schools and in the views expressed by so many principals and teachers. One of the Upstream principals explained how in his alternative school, “the graduation and attendance rates were fine and there was some engagement, but the curricular content was not really working and we would see kids graduate, go out into the real world and crash out. We had to do something different and that’s how we got involved in Upstream”. An Assistant Superintendent remarked that, “In Alt-Ed, four out of five classes for most kids were remediation. They were not able to do something interesting because all the programming was designed strictly for their deficits and trying to fill in what they were missing. Nobody had a chance to do projects that lead to empowerment or that someone cared about – Upstream and Big Picture are changing that”.

As a team or community, it isn’t that they are always or even often in regular contact as a whole group, but that, in addition to scheduled ‘check-ins’ (usually by conference call), there are frequent engagements between and among themselves as is relevant and needed or because there is good news and it had to be conveyed. Whenever some or all of them will be together at a gathering or conference, separate from Upstream, they will organize a ‘huddle time’, usually connect socially and carry on from where they had left off the previous time.

There is a kind and warm regard in their community of practice but this does not mean they avoid conflict or expressing disagreement. They can ‘call each other out’ or state plainly why they do not accept a particular point of view or suggestion. It is easy enough not to disagree with someone if you do not really care about something, but for the coaches, the work of Upstream Collaborative is ‘personal’ and has to do with equity and social justice and the lives of young people, their families and communities, and the lives of the staff in the schools, so it is ‘worth fighting for’. Furthermore, they want to know if their ‘coaching move’ is the right one because they recognize the important role they have and they want ‘this thing’ to work.

The coaches are confident and know that their educational approach works. They see that it works with principals and teachers in the same way that it works with students. The same design principles that are being introduced into the schools are the ones that inform their practices in coaching and in PD. They work ‘one-school-at-a-time’ ensuring that their
engagements are based on sound relationships, that it is relevant to the needs and the competencies of the school and that it is rigorous and challenging.

“Developing relationships is the key and you have to show up – be present – listen. I go in and see what is happening and I’m doing as much learning as possible about the school.”. “I like to move around, talk to people, to see what needs to be elevated. My job is to ask questions and guide them towards what they want to do. Folks have to come up with it on their own. ASK and GUIDE”. “I see my primary role is to serve the students of that community. I am there to help to build the capacity of the school. I also focus on the adults in and around the building. I get to know them and they get to know me”.

All the coaches remarked that one of the main things that they do is LISTEN. This single point should not be underestimated. Listening well to someone can accomplish a great deal. First, it is one of the main gateways to learning. Secondly, it affirms the other, making their views, perspectives and feelings meaningful and the focus of an interaction. Thirdly, it communicates the ethos of Upstream Collaborative that it is NOT about coming in and being the expert or the ONE showing the way; it is a collaborative, co-learning process that begins and ends with the needs and interests of the students and the school (in the same way that a personal curriculum for a student does). The ‘listening’ and the ‘way of listening’ emulate and reinforce many of the principles that Upstream is introducing and coaching.

One coach said that she has learned she needs to talk less. “As a coach, people are happy to see me and I am filling a need with the skills and ideas I bring. Because I’m not a principal, they can vent, and for leaders, I can be a partner. I can be an intermediary – giving feedback heard from one to the other – people hear it differently from me than if a principal or advisor was saying the same thing. I try not to offer solutions. I am not coming in as an expert but as a coach”. A second coach said, “I identify what you are trying to do and identify what the structures are – then I identify the contradictions and opportunities – there are always contradictions and there are always opportunities”. Another said: “I look at and listen for the values and priorities of the schools. My job is to ask questions and guide them towards what they want to do”. Another – “I suggest changes, challenge, but I don’t want to push staff”. Finally, “Coaching? I wondered what I was doing there. I was just going and listening, aware I knew little. I didn’t answer questions but asked back. ‘First, I want to ask you...’”. A lot of judgement is involved – feeling it out. People need to come to it on their own. It will continue when we go, if they believe in it. I apply pressure, then back off, apply pressure, then back off.”
The emphasis the coaches put on listening, discerning, and developing relationships does not mean that they are not bringing a vision or a strategy into their engagement with schools and in the PD they deliver. On the contrary, the coaches explained how they approach schools. Here is a selection of quotes from them.

From the beginning, to me, it's obvious that BPL is a great fit for Alt Ed kids. A lot of my work is about undoing adult mind-sets about kids, about what they think students can achieve and do. All can be successful but traditional school blinds us about that. The reality of what people expect to see from students is the biggest local barrier. You use the materials, the topic, the stuff to transform their thinking. You can't start with 'why do you have low expectations of students', you need to help them see their mind-set and what a BPL mind-set can do.

I struggle with work that schools are doing that is not connected to student interests. At times, the main difficulty in starting out on a redesign of a school is with teachers’ mentality, not ‘being there for kids’, not collaborating, not interested in innovation, so we work on not just how to navigate requirements but how to transform the whole way of learning and ‘doing’ school.

A lot of teachers’ and adults’ self-worth comes from doing things for kids; it can be difficult to let them (the students) do it. I often make the analogy to them about their own children. What kids do is not always going to be pretty but it’s beautiful. Once an adult gets over that limiting mind-set, it’s easy.

As a coach, I give permission and it’s about them being able to give kids permission but then getting out in front of it, by that I mean knowing beforehand what the indicators of success are and getting out to the Sup and Assistant Sup (school District Superintendents) to show that what they are doing is educationally sound and valuable. You have to intentionally create data that the District will understand. You bring people to the school from the start. Don’t be defensive – tell them what you are doing and have them see it. I make them aware of language – Not ‘we are doing these field trips’ rather ‘we are doing group job shadows’. You have to think about how you name things.

As coach, you have to be astute, adaptive to get at the mind-set and open it up. My job is to hold up a mirror to people and organisations to be their best selves. I remind them of their vision. I challenge the purpose of what they’re doing and re-align it with their values and vision.

Two principals said that they identified mistakes they made when they tried to be like a Big Picture school they had visited or heard about instead of paying attention to their particular school community. Both said that it was their coaches who gently brought them back into focus. A different principal said that he had rigidly attempted to apply BPL practices and did not account sufficiently for the need to understand how staff and students were taking in and adapting to the new approaches. He reflected on the way that his coach had been working with the school and began to adopt a slower approach, and taking a step back, allow people to move at their pace. “We had online PD and coaching and a handful of visits to work through the concepts that are difficult to understand how
they work. Things eventually click, it could be months later, but you can’t force it”. These comments connect to what one coach wrote about what Upstream has been learning.

There are key lessons that we continue to learn. For one, as we bring in additional schools, we are being explicit about the work we intend to do, the practices we intend to change, the implementation we’d like to see, and what might be some first steps in transforming these schools. Though BPL is transparent about this, we are not overly prescriptive – schools and their teams are given the flexibility to develop their own innovative practices at their own speed.

The consistency in the coaching approaches of Upstream Collaborative appears to be why the schools are adopting the re-design more quickly than one would expect, and usually in a deeper and more sustainable way. This makes sense because the approaches that are taken with schools are the approaches that they will be taking with students, so in that way there is a modelling and a reinforcement. Teachers and principals are ‘learning by doing’ with the support of one another, the coaches and the wider community of practice.

In reading the research and guides about school coaching generally, many of them advocate for approaches that correspond to what is considered ‘best practice’ in teaching. In one respect, this is how Upstream Collaborative coaching works, BUT it is significantly different in Upstream because the ‘best practice’ they are working from derives primarily from BPL rather than mainstream pedagogy. The Upstream coaches draw from their knowledge and experience of Big Picture and the general approaches and principles connected to it. This means that they tend to work one person/one school at a time and tailor their inputs to address the needs within the context of what is happening, what is relevant and what will move the school towards creating a culture built around serving one-student-at-a-time.

As mentioned above, the Upstream coaches bring a discerning eye and ear to the schools to encourage a vision that will bring equity and help students to flourish. They challenge schools in their PD by an approach to coaching that can be described as ‘asking without answering’, ‘answering by asking’ and ‘answering by not answering’. This approach is one of active listening in order to build relationships and figure out how best to meet their needs. The consequence of this coaching approach is that the people they are working with feel ‘trusted’, ‘valued’, ‘supported’, ‘inspired’ and ‘aware that they have to respond themselves’. They learn that there is not ‘ONE answer’, that ‘answers cannot be found in a ring binder’, and that ‘they should be confident that they can do the work themselves’.

The coaching approach to PD and leadership development reflects and demonstrates BPL principles and approaches, thereby further embedding those principles and approaches and equipping the schools to adopt these methods. There was unanimity in school staffs’ respect and appreciation for the coaching they have received. Time and time again, this was reported by principals and teachers as of the greatest significance in advancing the re-design and in the various ‘transformations’ they have witnessed in their schools and in the lives of the students.
LEADERSHIP

Nearly any change or learning involves a process and rarely happens immediately. This is especially the case when a school and community are undergoing a significant educational shift from a primary focus on teaching to a primary focus on learning, with student interests directing and shaping the curriculum. These changes are cultural changes involving a re-consideration of ‘the way we do things around here’, a re-orienting of practices and relationships and a re-alignment of the roles of the school staff and community including those of students and families, but perhaps especially of school leaders for such change to happen.

It should be noted that when the term ‘school leaders’ is used, this does not just refer to school Principals. The reason for this is that many leaders in the Upstream schools were not only the principals. The non-principal leaders were teachers as well as LTI co-ordinators and other support staff in schools. One of the schools, for instance, has had a yearly change of principals yet has continued to deepen its practices and redesign and has been an example in its District as well as to other schools. Of course, most of the school leaders are the principals, and the principals in the network have played a highly significant part in leading culture change and introducing and implementing new designs for teaching and learning.

Many leaders in Upstream Collaborative schools have described a key part in the process or re-design as ‘un-learning’. They were referring to the need to unlearn the traditional ways or ‘grammar of schooling’ where the system defines the content and program, the teachers deliver prescribed courses and students follow along, demonstrating mainly through testing that they have acquired the specified information. This ‘un-learning’ was seen by respondents as being necessary not just for Principals and Teachers but also for students, their families and the wider community.

There was consensus that in the process of adopting Big Picture practices and principles, when difficulties arise, it is easy to default to a traditional school approach where adults ‘command and control’ and students are expected to do as they are told. This is particularly the case where Upstream schools were at the early stages of making the transition, where a number of subjects are ‘being taught’ and where not everyone is that clear or even supportive of the BPL design. It is a process that takes patience, perseverance and good leadership. From the perspective of the coaches, there is a need to give time to let leaders find their way through the process, to allow them to ‘answer their own questions’ as they introduce new approaches and to take their time to embed the new culture into their schools.

Principals shared how they have had to be patient in supporting teachers to gain a working understanding of their roles and their relationships with students as they move, in many cases, from ‘teaching subjects’ to ‘overseeing and guiding learning’. Many remarked that they have also had to be patient with the process as they expressed concerns about pressures to meet State or District standards or to explain school changes to parents and students as well as to other educational colleagues.

Among all those interviewed, teachers expressed in various ways the greatest need for patience. Personally, they spoke of the need for patience in adapting to their changing role and in learning new approaches. Several commented on the need for patience with
students in allowing them the time, space and encouragement to explore their interests, develop their internships and adjust to a different approach to schooling. Nearly all spoke of the support, encouragement or challenges set by their principals that helped enable them during this time of change.

Parents said that they found the new experience for their children very helpful; a number stated that they had seen a real transformation in their son or daughter and that going to school had changed from ‘being a struggle to something they looked forward to and spoke about’. Nevertheless, two parents said that they were unsure about the new approach at first and had some concerns when they heard that their children were not having the same classes as in their previous school and that they were ‘doing things around their interests’. They commented on the reassurances they received from the principal or school leaders and said that they trusted in their leadership.

Many students were unsure about the new approaches at the beginning and said that it took time to figure out how to behave and what exactly they were supposed to be doing in school. For nearly all of them, once they had gotten involved in an internship or in doing a project on something that they were interested in, they really liked it. All the students were very appreciative of the interest shown in them by their teachers and principals and the way that they were ‘listened to and had a say in their program’. Some students, however, were still in the place of being unsure about their interests and what they wanted to do. There is a need for patience and leadership to maintain the focus on the bigger picture when there is confusion, uncertainty and a tendency to want to revert to more familiar ways.

The coaches have played a pivotal role in exemplifying leadership through their style and practice of coaching. School leaders have the support not just from the resources and the PD the coaches bring but significantly from the time they have been provided to be listened to, guided, challenged and supported. It is a truism that being in a leadership role is a lonely position, and school leadership is a lonely, demanding position that draws heavily on a leader’s skills, personal resources, time, emotions, mental health and capacities. Upstream Collaborative and its coaches have found a way to recognize, support, inspire and cultivate leaders primarily through relationships, through consistently relevant input and use of time, and by a rigorous and ongoing appraisal of how schools are being led in their redesign and transformation. The leadership developed in Upstream Collaborative has been enhanced by the creation of communities of practice.
COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

One of the goals of Upstream Collaborative is to be a community of practice network. One finding from the research is that Upstream as a collective group of alternative schools is both a large community of practice and a collection of many communities of practice. When Coaching Moves were discussed above, it was mentioned that the coaches have become a community of practice themselves on leading PD and cultivating leadership in alternative schools. They are a model of a community of practice and in so being, they are modelling and inspiring the schools to gather around shared interests and needs to learn and challenge each other. In other words, the movement is birthing new and varied communities of practice within its network by the manner in which they are being a community of practice.

The burgeoning communities of practice in Upstream Collaborative are forming both organically and by design. There is evidence of mini communities of practice made up of Principals or advisors from a few of the schools connecting with each other on a needs’ basis. There are communities of practice within schools and between whole schools. In the forthcoming year, plans have been activated to initiate gatherings of schools in micro-regions based on geographical proximity and interests.

Given the shared mission and common characteristics of many of the Upstream schools, the connections and emerging networks are happening naturally; however, in view of the expansion of Upstream Collaborative (See Table on page 24), the coaches have decided to organize and implement micro-regional gatherings. On the one hand, the growth within regions could be pivotal in deepening and expanding the influence of Upstream because the impact on a district will become diffuse. Furthermore, a critical mass of skilled and experienced school leaders will be forming who in turn can help grow the movement and share their learning. On the other hand, for the communities of practice to work with strong relationships, to have relevant inputs and PD, and to be rigorous in their engagements, there is a need to condense them.
## GROWTH IN REGIONS

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<td>2. Vista Visions Academy</td>
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<td>3. Alta Vista High School</td>
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<td>2. South Valley HS</td>
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<td>5. Elinor Hickey</td>
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<td>7. El Centro Juvenile Hall</td>
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<td>16. Be.tech Academy</td>
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<td>17. Marin County Community</td>
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Any community is based around things that are in common or shared. The basic community is the geographic one where people make up a community as a consequence simply of sharing the same space. Most other communities are formed around common interests, identities, values, interests or needs. The communities of practice that are being created and emerging in Upstream are important catalysts for all the people involved, for the school communities and the network itself and also for having a wider impact on both alternative and mainstream schools.

Even though the redesign is different in each Upstream Collaborative school, the schools share common identities or aspects (i.e. being part of the Upstream Collaborative community of practice, being an alternative school, working with students who have had negative school experiences) and they have common needs for training, leadership development, resources and seeing new ways to address problems. These common experiences create a level of solidarity and connection which builds a strong community of practice, an openness to learn from one another and a readiness to share ideas, struggles and suggestions.

The benefits of participating in a community of practice and engaging in collaborative learning are well established in research. The learning potential of the Upstream network is significant, and the data show how much respondents valued and have gained from their connection with others in terms of practice, support and new ideas or ways of looking at things. Vygotsky states that when a learner collaborates with more capable peers, the potential level of development increases. This process highlights the interdependency of learning and the social process of coming to new understandings together.

Johnson and Johnson (2009) show that cooperative or collaborative learning leads to greater productivity and higher achievements as well as more caring, supportive and committed relationships. Laal and Ghodsi (2011) indicate that collaborative learning is most successful the longer people are engaging with each other, when people see that they have a personal responsibility in achieving a group’s goals and when there is frequent and regular processing of the group on how well they are functioning and how they can be more effective. It is important to note that simply being a part of a network of learning may make little difference unless certain conditions are present. In short, these conditions could be stated in this order – relevance, relationships and rigor – and they are evident in Upstream Collaborative.

Upstream Collaborative as a community of practice network of alternative schools has been receiving regular PD and coaching on the principles and practices they need to reshape their schools. The work and the sharing of learning are highly relevant as schools are grappling with redesigning what they do and changing their culture. The network has been going for three years and is continuing with sessions in the schools and between schools, at regional gatherings and other conferences and through regular conference calls, visits and connections. All these encounters establish and build relationships where people are known and know each other. Everyone in the network is working towards redesigning and transforming their schools, creating a new culture and learning and implementing new approaches in response to student needs. Such work involves a great deal of rigor and challenges the school communities to stick with it and stay the course.
One thing that may distinguish Upstream Collaborative as a community of practice is that when the network gathers, it is NOT a simple matter of ‘collective learning’ in the sense that all are focused on learning and applying the same approaches and practices in the same way; rather, they are all engaged in learning, leadership and PD on how best to design their schools to improve learning. Although there is overlap with a number of things in common, schools are at different points and stages of adopting these changes and each school is quite distinctive in its staffing, student population, type of alternative school, local context and process of engagement. Any of the approaches or practices that schools are adopting should and will look different in each school as they are introduced and incorporated into its culture.

Upstream Collaborative is not delivering a programme, a package or a fixed educational model through its PD and coaching. The key to its success is that it is building up a movement in alternative education that is relevant to the needs and circumstances of each school through its network of learning. Schools learn together and from each other as a community of practice. They are not being trained in how to implement a specific approach but rather how to change their culture (i.e. values, practices and behaviors) in a way that suits the students – one-student-at-a-time. Principals, teachers, co-ordinators and support staff are open to figure out the best way forward with their students. This means that when things are not working, they have a community of practice and coaches to turn to for suggestions, support, insights, and experiences.

It may be that the Upstream communities of practice have formed and grown well because they resemble quite closely the BPL practice of advisories. As with an advisory, the Upstream communities of practice have formed as learning communities that learn from one another, learn from professional guidance and input, and ‘learn by leaving’. Leaving to Learn is a book by Elliot Washor that emphasizes the importance of out of school, real world learning that is best when people become a part of a community of practice. When staffs go to their community of practice, they are leaving their schools and going out to other schools or to gatherings, shared PD or conferences. They benefit from all the learning opportunities this ‘leaving’ brings. This again reinforces the BPL culture and practices where learning is interest driven, personal and shared in an advisory. Thus, the communities of practice are practicing the BPL principles and approaches that they are in turn building into their schools.
Rincón-Gallardo provides a stark and realistic assessment of educational change, but, in the context of the work of Upstream Collaborative, it is hopeful and encouraging.

In summary, most efforts to radically transform pedagogy at scale have so far been difficult, slow, and short lived. But the available evidence can only take us as far as concluding that radical, large-scale pedagogical transformation has not occurred. It does not imply that it cannot occur. There is widespread agreement that an effective solution has to be fundamentally different from past educational reform efforts in the United States and internationally. As Antonio Gramsci would put it, we are in a situation of crisis, where the old system is dying and the new one is yet to be born.

Hoppers (2005) finds significance in the way that alternative schools provide a substantive learning experience for children many of whom have been excluded from participation in mainstream education. He suggests that their approaches may be the key to transforming schooling.

Transformative responses are here defined as those characteristics that appear to constitute a rupture with conventional education values and practices by effectively promoting the transcendence of disadvantage, poverty and marginality, rather than acquiescence in its existence and adjustment to its conditions. … If we are looking for models of educational transformation, we need to move from a paradigm of ‘education for adjustment’ to one of ‘education for change’. … We would need to investigate the incidences of pedagogical practice and outcomes that help to compensate for disadvantage and have the potential of creating empowered citizens and promoting community emancipation. The manner in which key issues … are addressed within the context of the broader totality of basic education may influence whether these programmes will find their own place within the education system or have to remain outside, and whether they get bogged down in common problems or become beacons of hope for fundamental systemic change.

Rincón-Gallardo’s main contention is that a ‘radical transformation in pedagogy at scale’ can only happen with a radical transformation in culture. He argues that schools will have to transform how teachers and students interact with each other and with knowledge, how educators and leaders interact with their institutional environment, and how policy and practice interact with and influence each other. He thinks that this is most likely to happen as a social movement rather than as a school reform.

These are encouraging words in the light of the findings from this research on the impact of Upstream Collaborative on culture, practices, mind-sets, leadership, collaborative learning, and as an educational movement for equity. The Upstream schools have embarked on ‘radically transforming how teachers and students interact with each other’ through the emphasis on ‘one-student-at-a-time’ and student-driven interests.
The international literature gives hope to the possibility of wider educational transformations emanating from the principles and practices associated with much of alternative education. Sliwka (2008) asserts: “Schools in public systems across the OECD are increasingly broadening their philosophy of teaching to create settings for learning which aim at the integration of learners’ cognitive, metacognitive and social emotional development. To some extent, the shift has been driven by providers of alternative education, which are gaining in popularity among parents, to create more holistic approaches to education and focus on student potential for growth”.

In Germany, Bohl and Messner (2013) quoted in Sliwka, indicate that, “concepts from alternative education are acceptable, even with traditionalists. Several German States have created a legal framework for a new type of school, the ‘Gemeinschaftsschule’ - a comprehensive school based on 21st century learning principles addressing achievement, equity and well being, emphasising personalised and cooperative learning and the integration of cognition and metacognition”.

Discussing quite radical reform moves in Canada, Sliwka (2015) explains how transformation is underway across the province of Alberta.

It became apparent that the current education system was not in a position to adequately prepare a new generation of students for a rapidly changing and highly unpredictable future. ‘Education in Alberta will be shaped by a greater emphasis on education itself than on the school as an institution; with an emphasis more on the learner than on the system; more on competencies than on content; more on inquiry, discovery and the application of knowledge than on the dissemination of information; and more on technology to support the creation and sharing of knowledge than on technology to support teaching’ (Alberta Education, 2013, p. 2). No longer will it be enough for teachers to impart knowledge, facts and a narrow set of skills. The role of the teacher and of the student, in what can be described as a learning partnership, must evolve to support this new way of ‘Learning to Be’. Characteristics that may once have described the desired outcomes of isolated alternative education programmes now constitute the foundation of the large-scale public education system in the province.

The case is clearly being established in research and practice for the impact that alternative education can and should be having on mainstream education and on the transformation of teaching and learning. The interviews with District officials presented a positive outlook on the thinking and open-ness toward educational innovations and change. Schools and districts were described as ‘ripe’ and ‘ready’ for the type of work that Upstream is doing in California and Washington, and these views are supported by the research literature. The research of Fullan and Rincón-Gallardo, published in 2018 and entitled “California’s Golden Opportunity” provides many useful insights and suggestions on how Upstream could upscale to expand its network and influence not only in alternative schools but also into mainstream education.
Fullan’s work and analysis on whole system reform, indicates that the right or correct drivers of educational reform are capacity building, pedagogy, collaboration and system-ness. An approach described as a Coherence Framework is also advocated. It has four components – focusing direction, collaborative cultures, deepening pedagogy and learning, and internal accountability. These suggested approaches are what Upstream Collaborative actually does and is doing so well. The evidence suggests that Upstream is not just doing many things right but also that they are doing the types of things that are necessary to have a real impact on system reform.

It is recommended that Upstream Collaborative maintain its focus, keeping its view fixed on the bigger picture. For the coaches and school leaders, they need to continue to attend to the culture of each school. The focus should be ‘bi-focal’. The directors of Upstream with the support of the leaders in Big Picture Learning need to keep an eye on the rigor, relationships and relevant PD for redesigning the schools, while simultaneously upholding and attending to the wider vision of equity and educational change. As the name implies, there needs to be ongoing reflection, assessment, and consideration of ‘the big picture’ of educational change and transformation.

**Upstream Collaborative 2019 – 2020, Washington Schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL</th>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Seattle Interagency</td>
<td>Seattle School District</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Career Academy</td>
<td>Federal Way School District</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Chelan School of Innovation</td>
<td>Lake Chelan School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Methow Valley Independent Learning Center</td>
<td>Methow Valley School District</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Moses Lake High School</td>
<td>Moses Lake School District</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. New Start High School</td>
<td>Highline School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Quincy Innovation Academy</td>
<td>Quincy School District</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Selah Academy</td>
<td>Selah School District</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Soap Lake High School</td>
<td>Soap Lake School District</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. South Sound High School</td>
<td>North Thurston School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Tonasket Choice High School</td>
<td>Tonasket School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Open Doors</td>
<td>Federal Way School District</td>
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### Upstream Collaborative 2019 – 2020, California Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL</th>
<th>TYPE OF SCHOOL</th>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15. Be.tech Academy</td>
<td>Alternative, CTE, district charter</td>
<td>Manteca Unified School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Bitney Prep</td>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>Nevada County Office of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Buena Vista High School</td>
<td>Continuation</td>
<td>Paramount Unified School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Community Day School</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Paramount Unified School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Confluence High School</td>
<td>Continuation</td>
<td>Placer Union High School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. El Centro Juvenile Hall Jr./Sr. High</td>
<td>Juvenile hall</td>
<td>Sacramento County Office of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Elinor Lincoln Hickey Jr./Sr. High</td>
<td>Community day</td>
<td>Sacramento County Office of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Gerber Jr./Sr. High</td>
<td>Community day</td>
<td>Sacramento County Office of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Highland Park High School</td>
<td>Continuation</td>
<td>Los Angeles Unified School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Liberty High School</td>
<td>Continuation</td>
<td>Benicia Unified School District</td>
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<tr>
<td>25. North Area Community School</td>
<td>Community day</td>
<td>Sacramento County Office of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>26. South Valley High School</td>
<td>Continuation</td>
<td>Ukiah Unified School District</td>
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<tr>
<td>27. North Bay Met Academy</td>
<td>Continuation</td>
<td>Windsor Unified School District</td>
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<tr>
<td>28. Come Back Butte Charter</td>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>Butte County Office of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. BCCS-LEAD</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Butte County Office of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Hearthstone</td>
<td>Independent study</td>
<td>Butte County Office of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>31. Table Mountain School</td>
<td>Juvenile Hall</td>
<td>Butte County Office of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Step-Up</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Butte County Office of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Vista Visions Academy</td>
<td>Independent study, credit recovery program</td>
<td>Vista Unified School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. Alta Vista High School</td>
<td>Continuation</td>
<td>Vista Unified School District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. Marin County</td>
<td>Community Day</td>
<td>Marin County Office of Education</td>
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Upstream Collaborative began working with 11 schools; the number of alternative schools in the community of practice network has now more than tripled and is set to continue to grow. The Tables on pages 29 and 30 list the schools in Washington and California that will be part of Upstream Collaborative in 2019-2020. This is remarkable growth and testifies both to the abilities of the coaches and to the strength of the re-design principles and practices that are transforming alternative schools.

The coaching capacity of Upstream has allowed support across the multiple sites in quite different types of alternative schools and within different districts and systems (i.e. California and Washington). These present levels of coaching can be maintained and could be increased without too much difficulty. Because the coaches are aware of the prospects of scaling up, they are already identifying principals and teachers within the network who they see can serve as mentors, trainers and coaches to existing and new schools.

At the moment, Upstream and its coaches have kept a solid focus on the how, why and what of what they are doing, and the network has grown because healthy things grow; however, the process of growth, potential changes in school and district personnel, external forces and unexpected circumstances can at some point hinder or derail any movement. It is recommended that by and large Upstream needs simply to keep doing what they have been doing, but with an attentive eye on how growth, changes, and unexpected circumstances can and will be responded to and accommodated in schools and in the wider community of practice.

Already and as the success of the Upstream Collaborative schools become more widely known, they have been and will be receiving more requests from alternative schools and school districts for coaching and support. In addition to the work that will be required to recruit and prepare more coaches, there needs to be more learning and development on how to create mini-regions of support and collaboration not just for the delivery of PD but also to strengthen and deepen the communities of practice as more and more people get involved.

BPL is proud of the rapid growth and the new opportunities that have presented themselves in new districts and schools as a result of the coaching, leadership development, and redesign efforts of Upstream Collaborative. Upstream does have the strength of the people within the wider network of BPL who have navigated and continue to oversee a national and international upscaling of their educational movement. This resource should be tapped into to explore how best to draw from that wealth of experience and expertise.

Of course, very little widespread change or transformation will occur unless there is the political will and adequate funding to support it. Internationally, the policy research suggests that compared to College education, money is better invested in secondary schooling both for economic growth and for equity. Figueredo and Anzalone (2003) advise that, “A wiser strategy would reduce the share of spending going to higher education in order to expand secondary education. The shift certainly makes sense in terms of economic growth since social returns to secondary education exceed those to higher education. … Correcting this misallocation of funds should be a key element in any educational reform (USAID, 2000)”.

Adding to her argument, Figueredo and Anzalone, state: “There is evidence that alternative systems can provide good educational returns for investment. The experiences of countries
like Mexico, Brazil, South Korea, and Indonesia demonstrate that alternative models can eventually reach large audiences and become an important aspect of a national program to expand opportunities for secondary education.

Upstream does seem well placed to move sustainable educational reform and school transformation forward. The advice from some research is that neither top-down nor bottom-up change is all that effective; instead, the place is the middle. The ‘middle’ is not specifically defined, but Upstream can be seen to constitute part of the middle or more accurately, they are working from the margins to the middle and beginning to shape how the middle sees the way forward towards school change and system reform. Their influence is the result of the connections with and the increasing support from Districts at a time when there is a readiness for change.

The guidance Fullan and Rincón-Gallardo give to be an effective ‘middle’ is “to increase purposeful interaction that leads to greater specificity and sharing and to intervene selectively and supportively when progress in not occurring”. This mirrors the findings and the way Upstream has been operating in coaching leaders and schools, while gaining wider recognition among school districts.

To add even more strength to the position of Upstream, particularly in the state of California, the so-called California Way of educational reform is built on a collaborative approach to educational change. Fullan states that the three pillars of the report that informed and helped to generate the California Way are performance, equity and improvement. Upstream’s mission for equity places them in a prime position to complement the California Way and broaden their impact in the state.

In Washington, the BPL Upstream schools are spread across eight legislative districts. All of the schools either have the State Board of Education credit waiver or are applying for it. The schools with the credit waiver are a critical resource in Washington’s education improvement efforts. They comprise demonstrably effective non-charter innovations in (1) competency-based pathways, (2) career connected learning, (3) special education, and (4) reversing inequities perpetuated by the system of alternative and continuation schools.

Fullan and Rincón-Gallardo’s findings leave much to commend the process, practices and principles of Upstream Collaborative. One point they make is that education reformers consistently make the wrong assumption that when schools are given the freedom, funding and support to decide how to solve educational problems that they know what to do. They claim this assumption is unfounded and what should be assumed is that, “people are not changing their leading and teaching practices because they don’t know how, not because they’re not allowed to”. The clear implication is that principals and teachers need “to be shown how”; in other words, they need coaching and a community of practice to support and guide them. This is the work of Upstream Collaborative.

Furthermore, there are indications in the nationwide research and policy-making work done by ExcelinEd that positive, innovative educational change is not confined by any means to California and Washington. ExcelinEd has a strategy to advance competency and mastery-based, personalized learning across a broad range of innovative models, and their report of June 2019 provided a reasonably good overview and insight into state by state progress.
towards ‘Next Generation Learning’. They explain this concept by saying it, “prioritizes innovative, student-centered practices to ensure every student succeeds. But the transition from conventional, one-size-fits-all systems to systems that identify and adapt to student needs, cannot be achieved without the commitment of local leaders to try new approaches”. The Upstream Collaborative schools are clearly some of these ‘innovative, local leaders’.

ExcelinEd has advanced a range of documents and policies that would support and complement Upstream’s work. These include: ‘transitioning to student-centered learning’, ‘waivers and flexibility requests’, and ‘maximizing assessment and evaluation flexibility’. The work they have done on waivers and flexibility links in to the waivers that are afforded to all of the Upstream schools in Washington, but there is more work to be done on this. In Washington, BPL schools have had credit waivers since 2008 and have been able to pursue competency-based learning approaches to help transform the schools; however, despite the waivers, it remains the case that none of the existing frameworks allow for reporting without traditional credits, thus the competency-based pathway is effectively hindered. State legislation and policies are highly relevant to the sustainability of alternative, innovative schools and to the progression and prospects of students.

A 2018 State Auditor report by McCarthy of every Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) program in the state of Washington found that the students, “say they are able to express their own interests, demonstrate their unique skills, and deeply understand academic material by applying a variety of learning styles. As a result, students said they have improved confidence and leadership skills”. At the same time, the audit found that students who don’t have to worry about test scores or grades are grasping course material because they are relieved of the pressure associated with accumulating credits and passing tests. Yet, there is this paradox of not being able to report without using traditional credits.

ExcelinEd has set down a model policy which they refer to as a ‘Schools of Innovation Act for Next Generation Learning’. Its purpose is to allow schools of innovation both greater flexibility and greater control to meet the needs of their students. The caveat, as identified by Fullan and Rincón-Gallardo, is that schools do not always know how to meet the needs of their students and communities. Their claim is not a judgement on principals’ and teachers’ intelligence and commitment but their observation that many have not had the opportunity to develop the capacity to change pedagogy, practices and instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners. This is where Upstream Collaborative is making a unique contribution, and it is recommended that this work be supported to expand in California, Washington and beyond.

The principles and practices that Upstream are leading on through PD, coaching and creating communities of practice are showing the way and building the capacity of how to meet the diverse (and personal) needs of learners and their communities. It takes capacity to build capacity, and this is another area where Upstream is leading the way. At the moment, they are exploring with a District in California how each of their schools can have a BPL school as part of its program. There is interest and commitment from the District to pursue this in earnest. In a different county, Upstream is partnering with four of their programs and have strong District support for school redesign. The number of Washington State schools that have joined Upstream is growing and their capacity is further enhanced as they all are aligned with BPL, and BPL has already begun to identify policies and conditions for school change that can serve as a foundation for advocacy and policy reform.
The findings from this research suggest that the priorities for Upstream Collaborative should be the following.

### A. Building on the strengths of the communities of practice among principals and teachers in the network; there are three implications.

1. It is important to identify and guide leaders among the principals and teachers who can serve as mentors to their colleagues and act as coaches to new schools joining the network. This will in turn have implications for resources – both time and money – as mentors will need time to be released from school to do this, and they need to be funded and supported for this additional work which recognizes their leadership strengths and equips them for their role.

2. The Upstream schools should be developed into mini-regional clusters to maximize the benefits of being a part of a collaborative community of practice and to reduce travel and time costs. Once these mini-regions are established, they should invite other schools (alternative and mainstream) to observe and participate in their community of practice; this would spread the work and influence farther and help to reinforce the distinctive re-designs that are being introduced into the schools.

3. The micro-regions should overlap into other districts and counties. The overlap adds the benefit of connecting schools across boundaries thereby creating links to other school officials and fostering opportunities for a wider spread and connection between Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents.

### B. The expansion of BPL principles, practices and schools across the US and internationally shows that attention has to be paid to ‘translating’ the various forms of BPL authentic assessments into understandable language and data for school officials to understand, accept, and recognize. The emphasis should be on how the Upstream measures fulfil the educational objectives behind the acquisition of credits and grades. The BPL approach provides deeper forms of assessment of student learning which are more relevant to their education and to real world standards. Publicizing assessment data on the Upstream Collaborative schools that match or surpass the educational standards for traditional credits and grades should demonstrate how this work is being successfully done in California and Washington.

### C. Upstream Collaborative should be setting out to work more closely with supportive Districts and policy-makers to develop the time, resource and cost estimates for scaling the emerging alternative school designs across the alternative education system and into mainstream schools. There is an identified openness to do this work, and it is necessary to forge those partnerships to extend the reach and credibility of the Upstream work. Some of this is already happening so it is a recommendation to build on this good work, to communicate it more widely and the track the lessons learned from this engagement for related work in other districts and legislatures.
Lastly, it is recommended that in all its work and engagements, Upstream Collaborative needs to stick to and be consistent with its principles for the simple reason that they are educationally sound, proven and effective in leading educational change. The emphasis on one-at-a-time whether that is a student, a school, a superintendent or a district should be maintained. Developing and deepening personal relationships, working and engaging rigorously, and ensuring that there is relevance for each context are abiding principles that when adhered to will produce successful results. Finally, there is the recurrent need to keep an eye on the big picture, coming back time and again to the reason for this work - improving the lives of children, pursuing equity, and transforming schooling. For Upstream Collaborative, there is much work to do and at the moment, the conditions for greater impact and growth are favourable; however, even if the educational climate changes or when inevitable opposition and obstacles arise, it should be remembered that a river flows by the power of its current not the confinement of its banks.
REFERENCES


