

Public Works: Our Journey and Our Future

By Dr. Mikala Rahn, Founder & CEO, Public Works Inc.

Sixteen years ago, my husband Kurt and I moved to Pasadena where he had grown up. I was very pregnant and it was his turn to go to graduate school. I liked the idea of moving to a city that had a large gap between rich and poor as a microcosm of America's problems. I had just completed an amazing four years at UC Berkeley learning the ins and outs of federal and state education policy at work and at school. My boss and mentor at MPR Associates, Dr. Gary Hoachlander, taught me in action about the huge gap between research, policy and practice as we worked in over 20 states on accountability systems and high school reform. My mentor and professor, Dr. Charles Benson, a true believer in Dewey education and the tenants of Democracy and Education, taught me the importance of focusing on poverty issues in policy and practice and the need for both academic and vocational education. All students learn better in context, they need to apply what they learn. Armed with a PhD and two Masters, I was filled with great ideas and the spirit of contributing to needed change in education, especially at the secondary level.

However, transitioning was hard (new mother, new city, no mentors). I really believed that I had already worked in the best environment for me in Berkeley, so I decided it was time to create my own organization—one that tried to do what most organizations don't do—truly bridge research and practice. I have noticed over-time in my career that people graduate or move up into research or policy. Rarely do people work with families or children AND continue to do research and policy. It was my belief, and still is, that this great divide is what creates most of our poor policies or misses in implementation. So with a new partner, Michael Butler, who knew Los Angeles Unified School District [(LAUSD) a must in LA!] no money, a newborn, and a great Bible Study group, I took a huge leap of faith—Public Works, Inc. started. Our tagline developed by two of board members, Greg and Sloane Mann of the Fibonacci Design Group, was "Public Policy, Public Schools, Public Works." We saw it as "working for the public" often others saw the name as people who might fix toilets. As Michael would often say, "we fix a lot of plumbing, not that kind, but often just as dirty."



Mikala Rahn and Michael Butler, Co-Founders of Public Works Inc.

My sister then Kerri Limbrecht (now Abernathy) was the first employee of Public Works, and our office was in my garage. We started the business at the right time because government spending was up. I just wanted to pay our bills, but the work kept coming. I couldn't have done it without my ties to my colleague Phyllis Hudecki for national work or Michael Butler for local work.

Our non-profit status was approved in June, 1998. Our Board of Directors has always been knowledgeable and focused on education issues: Dr. Phyllis Hudecki, appointed as Oklahoma Secretary of Education in 2010 after serving as Executive Director of the Oklahoma Business and Education Coalition — a non-profit organization working to improve public education — has a special interest in education reform, career and college readiness, testing and accountability, standards, teacher training and professional development; Dave Banis, has returned to teaching in a Pasadena middle school having served as a district administrator locally and in other parts of the state, specializes in the critical areas of fiscal accountability, facilities, science and student disciplinary policies; Ty Gaffney, board member for La Salle High School and Public Works and an adjunct faculty member at USC, has served as a teacher and principal in the Pasadena Unified School District, focused on elementary and middle school education issues, visual and performing arts and teacher education; Kathy Lesley, Deputy Director, Pacific Region for America's Choice, Inc., has a deep understanding of and interest in standards-based curriculum and assessment, high school reform and career pathways for students; Michael Butler, Executive Vice President and Co-Founder of Public Works has been in the forefront of evaluation of current California education accountability and school reform, specializing in facilitating site and district-level data teams charged to improve instruction in reading and mathematics and English Learner (EL) instructional services; and Dr. Mikala Rahn, President and Co-Founder of Public Works is dedicated to elementary through secondary school reform in the area of accountability, curriculum, intervention programs, assessment, teacher retention and professional development including evaluations for the California Mathematics and Science Partnership, National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, National Science Foundation, and multiple state agencies and school districts.

We were right away involved in interesting research and evaluation. We had great clients like developing statewide accountability systems for the National Center for Research in Vocational Education; studying the implementation of the LEARNS initiative in LAUSD to change school governance and improve outcomes; studying a middle school juvenile divergence program called Angel Gate administered by National Guard; and evaluating teacher induction and professional development through Weingart funding. It was in the "hey day" of education funding, and we grew faster than we predicted.



Eventually my dad found us a small space to rent. Over-time we actually moved into all of that space and bought the building in 2001. This allowed us to begin to put our mission of bridging research and practice by starting our community learning center called, Learning Works! The concept was that the Public Works researchers would teacher/tutor K-12th grade children to understand their needs, and therefore, better understand the research. We started to serve families all over the Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD) that were at-risk academically or socially. Our services were free-\$10 per hour for enrichment and intervention classes as well as tutoring services.

Portraits of our students from Public Works' first annual report

We were so successful with our learning center, youth started to seek us out, not just parents or school staff. Strangely, this was occurring at the same time we were evaluating 60 high schools attempting to implement smaller learning communities or breaking the high school into smaller, more personalized environments. We were studying the huge dropout problem where schools begin with a large 9th grade class and some graduate only about 50% of that class by 12th grade. We were faced with the dropout problem in high schools in the data, and oddly dropouts were showing up at our learning center trying to get help to re-enroll in school. Long story, short... our experiment with PUSD led to us chartering a school for dropouts called Learning Works Charter School. Three years later, we serve youth in crisis including every gang in Pasadena (30% of our youth on probation), pregnant and teen mothers, extremely credit deficient student, and we love them and graduate them. We have graduated 229 students.

So here we are, 16 years later—not just an idea or a concept—but actual research meets practice. It was time to revisit ourselves. We started very focused on prevention strategies in elementary, middle, and high school—and what the charter school brought was an induction into intervention strategies and true poverty work. Its time to have three distinct brands that represent the diverse work that we do.

I am grateful for true friends who happen to be ultimate professionals, the Fibonacci Design Group who pushed us, shaped us, and coached us. We enter a very unsure and unfunded time in education, with a very confident and knowledgeable organization—Public Works (Data into Action), Community Works (Coaching into Opportunity), and Learning Works (Dropouts into Graduates).



The New Brand Identity circa 2011

I recently wrote three lines in a proposal that capture these three related and distinct entities.

1. We see our role as researchers influencing policy—bridging policy and practice.
2. We see our role as education coaches, tutors and mentors.
3. We see our role as advocates for the poor and disengaged, with one goal—all youth deserve a high school diploma.

I mark my days watching my son grow, he is now 16 and in 11th grade. I have a daughter that helps me remember when my life changed with a charter school. Public Works has been an amazing journey. I have the most fabulous staff and community. In a very unoptimistic time, I am very optimistic.

People use to say to me long ago, you will lose that “save the world” mentality. You will be jaded and understand there is only so much you can do. I am here to say...we have only started. I am still that “change the world” gal. I firmly believe the Margaret Mead quote: *“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”*