Sustaining Service-Learning: Lessons From Two Decades of Change

by Martha Rich

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Primary Partners getting to know each other.

"You can't mandate what matters." This pronouncement heads the list of Michael Fullan's lessons for reform in *The New Meaning of School Change*. I first read Fullan's work years ago, when I was a fledgling administrator seeking advice on the change process: How does it happen? What should I do to move it along? Most important, how could positive changes be sustained? Fullan's research offered a set of "lessons" for people like me, though most of his statements looked more like paradox than prescription. If you really "can't mandate what matters," how should a school leader proceed?

I knew what mattered to me, at least, and I believed it was important to the faculty and board of our school as well. Applying for the position as Thetford Academy's Head of School in the early nineties, I had stated three convictions: "that the most important responsibility of a school head is to support faculty in doing their best work...that all students can be successful learners... [and that] the effective functioning of a school depends on collaboration." I came to Thetford (an old independent academy that serves as a local public high school) with no experience as school administrator, but I did have a strong conviction about the potential of "learning community" as a model. Inspired by Roland Barth's *Improving Schools From Within*, I believed that the quality of adult relationships in a school shapes all other interactions. If professionals could work together in active, positive ways, that collaboration would affect everything else.

Change as a Journey

Among all the models for organizing a school, collaboration is the one least likely to succeed by mandate. It cannot be coerced or imposed; it needs instead, as Barth suggested, to be built from within. Fullan's conclusions underscored this. A "mandate for what matters" is impossible, he asserted, because there is no single, linear route to success. The second lesson on his list was: "Change is a journey, not a blueprint." Genuine reform is not a paint-by-numbers exercise, but a remarkably complex process, in which multiple forces work together over time to transform a school. In my early years as an administrator, I felt oddly comforted by this message about respecting complexity. It meant I would not be responsible for figuring it all out and telling everyone else what to do. Instead, I would need to support the best possible conditions for all of us to figure it out together.

Now, after nearly twenty years, the value of this approach stands out most clearly in our school's experience with service-learning. From a modest beginning in 1993—a single project that brought twenty high school students together with a class of kindergartners as "buddies"—we've become a place where all students participate in at least one service-learning project each year; where service-learning is integrated in a rich variety of forms across the curriculum, including local, national, and international components; and where students are real leaders in proposing, planning, and carrying out civic initiatives.

Collaboration and Service

This service-learning experience provides our most compelling evidence that building professional community can make a difference in a school. While creating a collaborative culture for adults was an aim from the start of this decade of change, the emphasis on service-learning was not originally a goal. Over time, though, the principles and practices of this approach have emerged as a defining element in our ongoing change process. As we've sought to make professional collaboration a core experience for faculty, we've also sought to make service-learning a central experience for students. While the school has pursued a wide variety of other improvements—in curriculum, climate, facilities, governance, and financing—our most consistent and powerful results have come from the sustained commitment to these two initiatives: improving teaching through collaboration, and improving learning through service.

At this point, in fact, we've come to see the two themes as closely linked. We now understand that service-learning works best when it's supported by effective adult partnerships—by teachers and community members who work and learn together, and who model that collaboration for students. At the same time, the climate of collegial support fosters innovation and outreach. Teachers are more willing to connect student learning with community needs and issues when they have their own context for shared work.

Over time, our work on sustainable service-learning programs has come to reflect many of the "site-level best practices" identified in Community Works Institute's guidebook *Connecting Service-Learning to the Curriculum*. If creating conditions for teachers to do their best work is the general goal for any school improvement effort, these practices define the specific conditions for service-learning to take root and flourish. They fall into three categories: *Mission and Policy*, *Organization and Resources*, and *Professional Development*. Some examples from our experience in each area will help explain how the process evolved at our site.

Our first service-learning project helped us discover several of the key practices. It began when two teachers, one at our high school teaching seniors and one at Thetford Elementary School teaching kindergarten, decided that their respective students might benefit from some interaction. They brought me an idea for getting the kids together, with the older ones serving as mentors in the kindergarten classroom. It happened that a request for service-

Martha Rich (at right) regularly observes and participates in classroom life at the Academy.

SITE LEVEL *Best Practices for Service-Learning*

1 Mission, Beliefs and Goals
Service-learning is promoted and systematically practiced as central to the school or organization's mission, beliefs and goals.

2 Policy
School or organizational policies support the use of quality service-learning on a system-wide basis.

3 Funding
Service-learning activities and goals are funded through the school or organization's budget.

4 Transportation
The school district or organization provides transportation for service-learning related activities.

5 Scheduling
The schedule of the school or organization supports service-learning.

6 Administrative Support
The administration is visibly active in supporting an integrated approach to service-learning.

7 Risk Management
The school or organization has a risk management plan that covers service-learning.

8 Coordination of Practice and Resources
Service-learning practice and resource needs are coordinated and supported by school system and/or organziation. Structural elements and resources exist to sustain quality service-learning practice.

9 Service-Learning Training
Educators and administrators are provided with strong training in the philosophy and pedagogy of service-learning.

10 Ongoing Professional Development
Ongoing opportunities are offered to educators and administrators to network, observe, and problem solve with other peers, within and outside their school or program, in order to refine their practice.

Excerpted from *Connecting Service-Learning to the Curriculum: A Workbook for Teachers and Administrators*. More Information at: www.communityworksinstitute.org

learning grant proposals had just crossed my desk. I encouraged the teachers, Barb Sorenson and Joanna Waldman, to apply for grant support, and helped them write the initial application. Although the teachers "owned" this project—their ideas, energy, and classroom expertise drove its implementation—my early interest and assistance felt important to them. It helped establish the pattern of one "best practice," that "the administration is visibly active in supporting an integrated approach to service-learning." As my support role has expanded over the years, though, I've stuck to that initial pattern of relationship with faculty: the program has to come from them. (Unless, of course, it comes from students or community members. In any case, an administrator's role is support, not initiation.)

A Schoolwide Approach Evolves

A student led activity during Thetford Academy's Operation Day's Work.

Another set of practices emerged from the early experience Barb, Joanna and I had with grant proposal writing. Preparing an application for funding established a dialogue among us, and pushed us to think clearly about goals and activities. This planning also laid the groundwork for sustained evolution of the project, as we continued renewal applications over five years. The original Primary Partners project led us, through the regular reflection required by grant reports, to articulate a series of principles for service-learning. Motivated by the teachers' natural and immediate interest in figuring out what worked in their classroom project, we arrived over several years at our own vision and mission for service-learning.

As it developed, we were able link it with the Academy's simultaneous work on defining a schoolwide mission, which included an emphasis on principles of "cooperation and caring." Through this gradual and complex process (which seems far more systematic in retrospect than it did at the time) our school found its way to the site-level best practices in this category: that "service-learning is promoted and systematically practiced as central to the school's mission, beliefs and goals" and that "school policies support the use of quality service-learning on a system-wide basis." Now, service-learning is cited in our school's formal mission statement and strategic plan, in the contractual professional standards for faculty evaluation, in the public-relations communication plan, and in virtually all publications, from the course guide to the school profile sent to colleges.

Coordination of resources—including organizational, budget, and other systemic supports—is another category of practices necessary to sustaining service-learning. At our site, this category most clearly demonstrates the complex, slowly evolving nature of schoolwide change. For example, a long struggle here to improve the school schedule (after six years of experimentation, we've settled into a long-block pattern) ran parallel to the growth of the service-learning program. Long blocks have proved to be extremely helpful in community-based work of all kinds, whether for school-to-work, service-learning, or curriculum-of-place goals: freed from the constraints of forty minute periods, kids can get out and do the kind of "real world" study and work that goes beyond the neat packaging of the traditional academic curriculum. (It should also be noted that no schedule is perfect. The semester block pattern we use for the upper grades here means that courses last just half a year—which can undermine the personal relationships central to many service-learning experiences. For our middle school, we use long blocks in courses that last all year, but meet on an alternating-day system; this can hamper coordination with the outside world, which doesn't do its business on an every-other-day basis!)

Balancing Funding

Funding, of course, is an ongoing challenge for most schools. Securing the necessary financial support for service-learning is especially difficult if these programs are viewed as adjunct or enrichment experiences, vulnerable to cuts when fiscal constraints send districts "back to basics." Outside grant funds can therefore be an important asset, particularly for getting service-learning started; even a small grant award can go a long way if disbursed as mini-grant "seed money" to multiple teachers. Eventually, sustaining service-learning,

requires the commitment of "hard money"—regular local funds. Clearly, the most effective strategy is to assert the value of service-learning as part of the core curriculum, rather than a separate "special" program.

In Thetford, we've had partial success with this effort. While our budget now reliably supports basic service-learning resources—funds for transportation, materials, and professional development—funding for personnel costs has been more variable. Those costs arise from the need for coordination; sooner or later, well integrated service-learning is likely to require coordinating personnel, at least on a part-time basis. Some schools create a position for this, perhaps combining it with other outreach or curriculum development functions. At the Academy, we've used a different model, committing equivalent funds to supporting team teaching; the partners can then conduct system-wide planning and take turns traveling for outreach (with no need for a substitute), as well as working together in classrooms. Testimony to the instructional value of teaming came recently in a message from a student: "I'm intentionally addressing this letter to the both of you because with your powers combined, you can stop all evil on the planet... sorry, got carried away there. On a serious note...I want to thank you guys for being such a good team. It was truly my pleasure and privilege to be a part of your class."

This year, however, the school funding crisis forced elimination of this kind of staffing from the regular budget, and we've turned back to seeking grants. As the school budget debates dragged on in Thetford this spring—it took three votes to pass a budget here—one heartening aspect of the public discussion was community members' expressed support for service-learning. When school board members proposed cutting service-learning programs to help bring the tax rate down, citizens defended the programs, sometimes passionately. Intergenerational projects (like a third-grade unit that brings senior citizens into Thetford Elementary for six weeks of shared storytelling and puppetry each year) and highly visible service efforts (like the Academy's annual community work day) were most often cited. It was encouraging to hear taxpayers advocate investment in this unconventional educational approach, even when funds seemed critically short.

Barb Sorenson and Joanna Waldman sharing their work with participant teachers at a Community Works Institute workshop.

Professional Development

Site-level best practices for professional development are perhaps the most obvious elements in building sustainable service-learning program. Even with a promising start in one project generated by dedicated individuals, systemic change requires that many more teachers be "provided with strong training in the philosophy and pedagogy of service-learning" and that following this orientation they "are offered ongoing opportunities to network, observe, and problem solve with other teachers, within and outside their school, in order to refine their practice."

In our experience, two factors were critical in arriving at these practices. One was teacher-led training. After a couple of years, Barb and Joanna were so enthusiastic about their experiment that they wanted to share their ideas; they believed that at least some of their colleagues could adapt the principles of the Primary Partners project to other subjects, grade levels, and needs. We therefore used most of our successive grant funding over three years to offer site based summer institutes, training both faculty and community partners, and to provide small "in-house" mini-grants to those who designed new pilot projects. While we had valuable help from outside presenters— Cynthia Parsons of SerVermont, Faith Dunne of Dartmouth College, activist writer Grace Paley—the leaders were our own local experts, teachers who were encouraging their own colleagues to try something new. After three years of training, there were more than twenty new projects under way at the Academy and Elementary School.

The other key factor in professional development here was related to Fullan's first lesson: our promotion of service-learning was an invitation, not a mandate. Despite the eventual proliferation of service-learning projects and programs, we have never made participation a formal requirement for teachers or for students.

Instead, we've sought to build a culture that makes voluntary involvement attractive and rewarding—and we've left room for those who don't make this choice.

This approach has yielded some interesting and unexpected results. One of the most compelling examples is our Physics Project in Assistive Technology, started by a teacher who had no training and no expressed interest in service-based models. Marc's project began with a far more humble goal—his wish to combat "senioritis" by finding some way to engage students more actively in the study of physics during the spring before graduation. His idea—to assign them an engineering problem-solving project that would address the needs of students with intensive special needs and be evaluated by a community panel—has evolved over five years to become an award-winning program, recognized as a clear exemplar of the way quality service-learning can be integrated with advanced science instruction. (More details at www.communityworksinstitute.org)

Physics and special needs students at the school working over a number of years together formed a powerful and meaningful partnership. The "project" later broadened into the community.

It was a whole year, though, before we even gave it the "S-L" label. One day, as Marc was describing his plans for the second year, I pointed out that the project seemed to have all the elements of good service-learning practice: would he like to learn more about that? By this time, the Academy had developed some of those "ongoing opportunities to network, observe, and problem solve with other teachers," based in the Critical Friends Group model for promoting reflective practice. Marc's commitment to that work helped him refine his integration of service-learning as an explicit element of the physics unit—and other teachers got to learn from his ideas as well.

For me as an administrator, the best part of this story is the evidence that midway through our decade of change, the conditions were in place to support innovative and powerful curriculum development in service-learning—and that no mandate was needed. Marc described the school to an interviewer this way: "Something has happened that makes this a great place for me to be.... There is a belief that true learning occurs when more than just your brain is active, when all of you is active and engaged. I think Martha really supports that in a lot of different ways. She doesn't go around banging a stick on the table—it's part of the vocabulary that we use here. It's in my conversations with people. It's just here, it's present. A lot of it has to do with... my comfort level with being able to experiment."

As time goes on, we see mounting evidence that students, too, experience the school climate in a way that encourages them to generate their own ideas, projects, and forms of leadership. For example, all students who experienced the Assistive Tech project this spring advocated strongly for the school to organize more inclusion for students with intensive special needs—and some of them will be working on that initiative this fall. As both teacher-led and student-led projects continue to emerge and evolve, it seems safe to say that service-learning has become "central to the school's mission, beliefs and goals." To other administrators, then, I can offer a few "lessons" of my own. I'm fully convinced now that Michael Fullan was right with his number one lesson: you can't mandate what matters. Amid all the complexity and unpredictability of the school change process, however, there are a few simple things you can do: Trust teachers. Trust kids. Give them room to experiment. Coach, support, and celebrate their work. Then shape the vision out of what's best in their work—and keep linking new experiments to that evolving vision.

It may also help to keep a final Fullan lesson in mind, the one that concludes his list: "Every person is a change agent." That potential lies in a seventh grader as well as a veteran teacher, in the head of the local garden club as well as the Head of School. Getting the conditions right to tap their potential may be a long journey, but it's a trip worth taking. After traveling for nearly two decades on that road to change, I feel more confident than I used to about our direction. I still can't know exactly what's around the bend, but I do feel I'm in good company. That, more than anything else, makes the going good.