

Everything Else Follows: From Community-Centered Schools to Education-Centered Communities

by

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I resigned my job as a high school principal because too much of my life was being spent in all the usual arguments about the work rather than in efforts to get the work done. I wanted time to read, to find my own teachers, and to find the real work.

As I listened to endless arguments about the purposes and methods of schooling, it became more clear that since schools are embedded in communities, any enduring reform would need to elevate the entire community.

Viewed from the school side, we can see that most of our troubles at school are rooted in failures in our communities. Viewed from the community side, we can see that our profit- and pleasure-centered communities have a difficult time judging whether a casino might not be as useful an institution as a library, museum or art gallery. As more people flock to the former and avoid the latter, our power to confront these challenges dissipates.

But when the children turn to the community for help and guidance, and a host of individuals and agencies responds, a sense of shared direction begins forming once again. Everything else follows.

Using these tips from the Montana Heritage Project, any teacher can make a school more community-centered.

1. Take Community Seriously

When we take community seriously, we make it the subject of serious study. We explore such questions as, What does it take to build community? What does it take to sustain community? What makes a community good?

The study of community is naturally integrative, since a community includes its natural environment; its built environment — including its architecture, its roads and bridges, its septic systems, its telephones and televisions, its industries —; and its history, including the ideas and migrations that have shaped it, linking it to all times and places.

2. Invite Mentors to Join the Work

"When you get a student-to-adult ratio of about 5-to-1, things start to happen," says Chuck Merja, a Stanford-trained engineer who farms in Montana's Sun River Valley and works with local high school students each week. Chuck was invited into the Montana Heritage program by English teacher Dorothea Susag, who involves dozens of community members in her students' research projects.

Dorothea points out that mentors are research partners and teachers rather than chaperones. At the orientation meeting for each year's research project, she tells volunteers that their responsibilities might include participating with the students in original research; meeting with them during class time; helping guide and focus their research (suggesting contacts and helping arrange interviews); accompanying students to libraries or interviews; and helping students form conclusions.

3. Use Oral Interviews Throughout the Curriculum

Oral interviews teach kids the quickest and most powerful way into a new body of knowledge: Find an expert source and ask him or her to explain the important issues. In the process, students learn to make appointments, take notes, listen, interact with adults, and report their findings back to the group.

One student in Libby said she learned that every other person is more fascinating than a novel; all you need to do is ask questions and listen — really listen. Oral history projects allow students to gather local history that would otherwise be lost, and to "tell the stories" of local minority groups whose cultural heritage might not be represented in published materials.

Oral history projects can also link the generations. Older people who are sometimes leery of "kids these days" often find themselves delighted with the young people, tape recorders and cameras in hand, who come to learn from them.

4. Provide Accountability and Recognition through Public Exhibitions of Mastery

In the Heritage Project, the final products of students' scholarship are published and presented in public. Each project is expected to end in tangible work of enduring value that takes the form of a "gift of scholarship" given back to the community — biographies of community elders, a history of the fire department, or recordings of a local musician's work.

When students demonstrate what they have learned, they see that learning has a public purpose. Students also gain recognition and honor for work well done. As public exhibitions gain an audience, they create an organic tendency toward higher standards. At basketball tournaments, the audience pays most attention to the best performances, learning from them and using them as the standard to aim for. The same thing would happen with academic work, if a few of us wanted it to.

5. Start a School Archive of Local Materials and Student Work

The work students gather and create should be preserved, and future student researchers should use it as a starting point in their work.

This body of knowledge, which might seem insignificant at first, grows in importance through the years of work. In time, the local archives can become the school's most important educational resource, like a family's photo album, allowing learning to move beyond the dullness of mass schooling toward learning that deeply engages the learners.

Using and adding to this local research project clarifies and deepens the school's central purpose, and the collection itself orients new teachers and new students to the larger mission of which they are a part.

At the beginning, all you need is a file cabinet.

More writings by Michael Umphrey and information on the Montana Heritage Project are available at www.edheritage.org.