

Opinion | Commentary

A school's self-guided improvements

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How do we improve education? This question is debated weekly in the media. People point to the Finland Phenomenon, charter schools, No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. With new pressures of school accountability and the interconnected global economy, it is more important than ever to develop a philosophy and a corresponding system to help guide schools to meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving world.

In Vermont, the pace for school transformation has quickened, especially in the last two years. The governor's office and the Agency of Education support initiatives that are in line with some of the best thinking on how to meet the changing expectations for education.

However, some of the most innovative thinking is not coming from above, but from the ground level, where the action is. Teachers and students in local schools are making their own plans on how to meet these demands and tie efforts together to improve student learning. The laboratory is the school itself, and the benefactor supporting the research is Vermont's own Rowland Foundation.

The Rowland Foundation is a small organization funded through the generosity of Barry and Wendy Rowland, residents of Londonderry, and longtime supporters of education in the area. Since 2009, their foundation has supported efforts to improve education, not by funding research theorists or professors from afar, but by supporting Vermont teachers who live amid the challenges they face every day in their school communities. Former Burr and Burton Headmaster Chuck Scranton leads the organization that selects a number of teachers every year. Each teacher applies to the Rowland Foundation with a proposal for a plan of study, along with a principal's commitment to implementation.

In just five years, the Rowland Foundation has paid for 30 fellows to develop their own initiatives within their schools. In addition, the foundation now hosts a statewide day of learning at the University of Vermont, showcasing best practices developed by Vermont's educators. In the last two years, this conference has brought world-renowned thinkers Sir Ken Robinson and Tony Wagner to inspire the education community.

The Rowland Foundation's process is simple. Given the opportunity, school staff and students can work together to study and then lead change. The emphasis is on developing a true learning community. Teachers continue to strive for the expectation that all students will succeed. And although guidance from the federal and state level is beneficial, the Rowland Foundation operates on the premise that the most effective path toward improvement is when inspired teachers commit together to create the structures and the culture for which they have always hoped, but, in the past, have not had the resources or time to be able to develop.

Rutland High School is a beneficiary of the Rowland Foundation's generosity. Within the last three years, two Rowland Fellows began the process of implementing concepts that 10 years ago were only ideas and "what ifs." Because of the initial work supported by Rowland, Rutland High School now has a ninth-grade team of teacher leaders who strive toward a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach to providing an integrated curriculum and stronger supportive relationships for our new students.

Another Rowland Fellow planted the seed of developing a global studies curriculum up through the grades, continuing to build rigorous expectations while extending relevancy to what students learn. That seed grew, now fostered by other teachers in the ninth and 10th grade.

The Rowland model is that teachers have the knowledge and understanding to create school improvement effectively, while bringing students into a partnership to strengthen the results. That inspiration has spread throughout Rutland High

School. Teams of teachers built a credit recovery system, a stronger reporting system, and a “Pyramid of Interventions” that works to make certain no student falls behind. Teaching staff and students led the study of grading systems that promote learning rather than just report on learning. Teaching staff now share leadership within collaborative teams, determining what students will know and how teachers make certain this actually happens. Teachers analyze student results at each team level, even leading the whole school analysis through the data team. Teachers have laid the foundation for an advisory system. Teachers and students are developing our global studies and STEM initiatives. All of this continues to grow.

The most important lesson of Rutland High School’s partnership with the Rowland Foundation is that great things can happen when the impetus for change is fostered locally. Talented teachers and students of all backgrounds and interests see themselves as the solution. As the debate continues on how best to meet the educational challenges that our children face, Vermont’s own Rowland Foundation should serve as a national model for how to create effective school improvement.

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