



Letter to Fellows

The Democratic Mission

May 2024

Dear Rowland Fellows,

I hope the bustle of May and promise of good weather come as a boost this time of year.

In a few weeks, we'll honor our young people with graduation gowns, backyard barbecues, and soaring commencement speeches. With these celebrations, we will acknowledge their academic achievement and encourage them to go out into the world and make a difference. We'll welcome them as fully adult citizens into our local and global communities. We'll also quietly hope that we've prepared them well to go out and take their place in the world.

Our school's mission statements reflect this hope for our young people. If we look at these mission statements, the idea of citizenship in a democratic society comes up pretty often. Here are a few recent examples from Vermont high schools:

To prepare our students to become lifelong learners, gain creative and critical thinking skills, and knowledge in order to become **productive contributing citizens**.

To provide an academically rigorous, safe, and healthy learning community that fosters the intellectual integrity, strength of character, respect, and accountability required of **capable, contributing citizens of a global society**.

Students will be **able & motivated contributors to their local, national, and global communities**.

So there's a certain idea of school as the place that citizens are made. It's an idea that many of us still hold dear, and that we can trace back to Jefferson and Madison, or even back to the moral imperative of the 17th Century New England "common school". The common school was paid for by the local community for all children, and held in common as a shared asset. There were certain moral beliefs and essential knowledge that were held in common as well.

As a society, we're really struggling with that common purpose now. I guess that's to be expected when you think about the divisive power of gerrymandering, partisan media, social media, and algorithms. And it's pretty terrifying to see book bans making a comeback, or screaming matches becoming the norm at school board meetings.

But in a weird way, these conflicts actually prove the importance of school. They show that people really do see schools as places where young minds are shaped and certain values are learned. The moral panics about school, in fact, prove that the classroom remains a powerful place of learning, even when it doesn't always feel like it. And even when the discourse is ugly, the recent conflicts at sporting events and school board meetings show our fellow citizens coming together in person to (messily) sort things out—important things about our country's history, about human rights, and about what school is for.

Borrowing an expression from the French, when I was a teacher, I always thought of school as the “crucible of the republic”, in other words, the place where young people from all walks of life get thrown together, all mashed up in there, and somehow learn to live together.

So maybe we're actually doing a better job than we think. I mean, we saw how it went during the pandemic when school was just a laptop in a bedroom, right? It didn't go so well for kids. In fact, time and again, they told us that they were dying to come back to school, to see their friends, even just to share halls full of lockers with humans again.

And maybe just by showing up everyday and working with kids, teachers are showing a kind of civic devotion, a kind of commitment to this shared project, this common endeavor.

But if we agree that school is the place that the citizens of tomorrow are forged, we need to keep having real and rigorous (messy) conversations about our democracy. We need to find the courage and the skills to have authentic conversations when our students ask:

- What is antisemitism?
- When is an idea or system racist?
- What is acceptable speech, and what is hate speech?
- Why don't we have Constitutional Amendments anymore?
- What does it mean to be a citizen vs. a resident in a country?
- Why is it possible to lose the popular vote and still become President?
- What does the Vermont State Motto, “Freedom and Unity,” really mean?
- What types of protests are allowed under the constitutional right to assembly?

If, in school, we shy away from real conversations about how our democracy works and the issues that students care about, then we're sending an unspoken message that school isn't really about citizen formation—it's just about “student performance” on test scores.

That's why I'm so excited about the **13th Annual Rowland Conference** on the theme of ***Democracy & School*** with keynote speaker Jill Lepore. Even in this election year when everything seems political, we need to find ways to talk with each other and have civil discourse. I'm thrilled about the workshop discussions we'll have on everything from restorative practice to deeper learning, from student-led inquiry to social justice. If you have an idea for a related workshop, please send me your proposal! ([Make a copy and edit this doc please.](#))

Finally, I would just like to add that how we teach is as important as what we teach. In other words, the way we show up for students (and allow them to show up), the way we ensure all

voices are heard, the way we model civility and generosity of spirit...this has everything to do with teaching democracy. In our imperfect school settings, with cinderblock walls and the strident sounds of the PA, we can still convene a circle, or provide movement breaks, or take our class outside. We can still find some connection and joy together by means of [30 Second Dance Parties](#), [Paper Telephone](#), [Classroom Sign Language Practice](#), or [Say, Say Do](#). These choices cultivate a sense of community and bring our attention back to each other and the experiential nature of school, which is often more important to our students than the curriculum. Equally important, these investments in community establish the trust and social safety necessary to have the hard conversations.

In *Democracy and Education* (1916), John Dewey wrote, “We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference.” It seems like over a hundred years later, we’re still working on this.

During the pandemic, we saw how much our young people yearned for community and connection. So, it’s important for us to remember that school is not just a commodity, not just a competition, but rather a cornerstone of our democracy.

Thank you for your work with our young citizens.

Wishing you & your loved ones all the very best,

Mike

P.S. Thank you for sending me your news, celebrations, photos, and courtesy postings for this letter each month!

P.P.S. Do you have any ideas about school or learning that you would like to share? Please feel free to send us a **Rowland Blog post**! No length or genre requirements—it doesn’t have to be an op-ed or position paper. Personal essays, poetry, photos and other media and genres are most welcome. Feel free to contact Abby abby@therowlandfoundation.org or me with any questions or ideas.

Rowland Foundation Updates

Early Bird is Open!

Please tell your friends and neighbors: early bird is open! We already have a dozen school teams signed up and [Early Bird Conference Pre-Registration](#) is filling fast. Make sure to save a spot for your team and [share our flyer](#) with colleagues. And anyone who has never been to the Annual Rowland Conference should visit our [beautiful conference page](#) on our website, which features past keynote videos and plenty of event photos.

The Annual Rowland Conference



The 13th Annual Rowland Conference will take place on Thursday, October 17, 2024 on the theme of *Democracy & School* with keynote speaker Jill Lepore. Dr. Lepore writes for *The New Yorker* and teaches at Harvard University. She is the author of [These Truths](#), a one-volume history of the United States that was a New York Times bestseller. You can also catch her on the Pushkin Industries podcasts [The Last Archive](#) or [Elon Musk: The Evening Rocket](#). Here are some of [Mike's favorite Jill Lepore quotes](#). Dr. Lepore also recently submitted an amicus brief to the Supreme Court, [discussed here](#).

Use this link for the [Early Bird Conference Pre-Registration](#) to save a spot—and save money—for your school's team(s). Early bird will close on June 30th or when we have 35 teams registered, whichever comes first.

Call for Workshop Proposals

Do you have an idea for a workshop about democracy in school? Perhaps on restorative practices, civics literacy, service learning, antiracism, student leadership, or constructive dialogue across difference (e.g., Harkness/Socratic Seminar)? The Rowland Foundation is looking for high-quality and engaging workshop proposals on the theme of democracy in school for the **13th Annual Rowland Conference**, to take place on Thursday, October 17, 2024. Please consider sharing your ideas and talents at our next conference — and feel free to share this invitation with your Vermont colleagues. To submit a workshop proposal, simply [copy and complete this Google Doc](#) and submit it to info@therowlandfoundation.org by **May 15, 2024**.

New Fellowship Info Sessions: Third Thursdays of the Month

Starting with proposals for the 2025 Rowland Fellows Cohort, we're changing our application process: instead of a December 31st deadline, prospective Rowland Fellows will have an application window of November 1st to December 31st. Last year, it seemed that some candidates may have run out of time to apply after attending a mid-November Fellowship Info Night, so we're encouraging educators to start early this year...like right away!

To that end, Executive Director Mike Martin (RF09) will be hosting **Fellowship Info Sessions on Third Thursdays of the Month 4:00 - 5:00pm**. Starting this spring, and leading all the way up to our Rowland Fellowship Application Window (Nov. 1 - Dec. 31), Mike will meet with Vermont educators interested in applying at [this Google Meet link](#). Please tell your colleagues who would make great Rowland Fellows to come learn more on any of the following dates: **May 16, June 20, August 15, September 19, and October 17**. Mike is looking forward to telling interested teachers more about this amazing opportunity in a conversational format online.

Diversifying the Educator Workforce



Mike McRaith (RF13) and Executive Director Mike Martin recently attended a meeting of the Vermont DEW Coalition in South Burlington with colleagues from around the state, facilitated by Danielle Pierre of Great Schools Partnership seen here. If you are interested in joining the coalition, [please complete this short Google Form](#).

Otter Valley Career Preparation Pathway



As part of his Rowland Fellowship work, Devon Karpak (RF22) launched Otter Valley's Career Preparation Pathway with a schoolwide event last month.



Otter Valley students meeting with local business and nonprofit leaders, as well as post-secondary institutions, to learn more about college & career pathways.



Mike Martin (RF09), Devon Karpak (RF22) & Otter Valley Principal Michael Ruppel (RF17) celebrating the launch of the school's new Career Preparation Pathway.



Mike Martin met with Superintendent Bill Olsen (left) and StartUp Rutland's Bill Lucci (right) at The Hub in downtown Rutland. As Principal of Rutland High School, Bill Olsen encouraged

many of his teachers to apply for Rowland Fellowships and enthusiastically supported their work. Later this month Mike & Bill will record an interview with Mr. Lucci to discuss the benefits of Rowland Fellowships on his podcast, [View from the Top](#).



Becky Ebel (RF22), Jeanie Phillips (RF14) & Mary Schell (RF10) were happy to connect with each other and join educators, students, and community leaders at the [2nd Annual Education Justice Conference](#).



Kathy Cadwell (RF16) visited Mike Martin in the Rowland Foundation offices to discuss her upcoming consulting work in India.

Celebrations



Congratulations to Colin McKaig! He has received a fellowship with the [Vermont Studio Center](#) for this spring's Vermont Week. This fully-funded residency will bring Vermont writers and visual artists to VSC to write, paint, sculpt and engage with visiting artists for critique and study. As a writer, Colin will be working with this year's visiting author, [Kerrin McCadden](#), whose lovely introduction of Ross Gay many will remember from our last conference. Colin sends this message to his fellow Rowland Fellows:

“Like so many have said about our Rowland fellowships, one of its greatest gifts is time. I'm incredibly excited to have an entire week, free of distraction and the daily grind of the quotidian, to write, think, share and listen. I have two substantial manuscripts, a few professional writing drafts, and tons of musings, ponderings, and back-of-the-envelope ideas that will get some attention. Not to mention time to read, break bread with fellow Vermont artists, offer readings, and receive feedback on my work.

I hope this finds all of you well. It's so great that after more than a decade (go #RF13!), my Rowland Fellowship remains vibrant and relevant, important and central to my role in education.”

Congratulations to Bianca McKeen! She was recently featured in the Rutland Herald after receiving the award of Vermont Principal of the Year from the Vermont Principals' Association. [Check out the article here.](#)

Congratulations to Melissa Wyman! As a 2024 Rowland Fellow, [NBC5 featured a report on her Fellowship award](#) and plans to develop place-based learning at Hartford High School.

Courtesy Postings



THE **ROWLAND** foundation



The Great Schools Partnership, The Rowland Foundation, and Shelburne Farms are pleased to sponsor two new course offerings starting this summer, both designed and instructed by Senior Associate Jeanie Phillips (RF14):

Collaborative Practices for Equity

August 21-23, September 30, and November 8, 2024 from 9am-4pm

This is a highly participatory course designed for teachers and administrators interested in developing the skills necessary for leading equity work. Participants will actively build a culture that supports collaboration and will reflect on the process of sustaining a collaborative culture in their own settings. [Please share the flyer with colleagues!](#)

[Register here!](#)

Responsive Facilitation for Systems Change

August 19-20, October 1, November 7, and December 9, 2024 from 9am-4pm

This course is designed to build on the Collaborative Practices for Equity course with school leaders in mind. Participants will practice intentional agenda design and responsive facilitation. They will build an understanding of adult learning theory, systems change models, and liberatory pedagogies. They are strongly encouraged to leverage this course for systems change in their own settings. [Please share the flyer with colleagues!](#)

[Register here!](#)



Burlington School District is seeking a **Place Based Learning Coordinator** to join a partnership of the Burlington School District and Shelburne Farms, [BCL] a non-profit leader in education for sustainability and professional learning. Burlington City & Lake Semester [BCL] is an award-winning place-based experiential program for a diverse group of Burlington High School students. Each semester, a group of ~22 students have the opportunity to step away from their traditional high school schedule, and experience the city as both classroom and curriculum. [Find out more about this opportunity here.](#)



Schools and school leaders need a new approach! Compassionate systems is a powerful framework for educators interested in rehumanizing educational spaces. In partnership with Peter Senge & the Center for Systems Awareness, the Vermont Rural Education Collaborative and Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union are pleased to announce a 3-day introduction to **Compassionate Systems Leadership** to take place Vermont State University's Lyndon Campus May 6-8, 2024 (9:00am - 5:00pm). [Register here.](#) [Learn more here.](#)



Registration is now open for the 2024-2025 **Onward: A Yearlong Emotional Resiliency Immersion for Educators!** In this immersive graduate course experience, educators will be provided the structure, knowledge, and guidance to reflect on their professional journey, contemplate change, practice new ways of being, and co-create a community of support. Throughout the school year, we will learn strategies and apply mindset shifts to manage stress and overcome the challenges of the teaching profession. Learn more [here](#) and/or contact Tara Cariano directly at info@taracariano.com.
