



The
ROWLAND
Foundation

Investing in
Vermont's Teachers

Letter to Fellows

Storytelling

April 2025

Dear Rowland Fellows,

What if storytelling is an act of resistance?

I mean, the way we understand things is often by telling stories, and we know that our brains are hardwired for narrative, so there's a lot of power there. We also know that powerful people go to great lengths to "control the narrative" and that certain stories often get left out — that's why *counternarratives* are so important in a pluralistic, liberal democracy.

The story that's often told about the federal government is that it's slow, wasteful, and inefficient. And yet, many of our country's greatest achievements, from the interstate to vaccines, from warplanes to satellites, would not be possible if left to individual states and the private sector alone.

The same goes for schools. For decades, many Americans have said that they don't think public education is great in the U.S., yet a large majority rate their local public school as excellent. It's hard to untangle this contradiction without recognizing that some *powerful interest groups want us to think that our schools are failing*. It's the built-in assumption of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the main argument of countless books, going all the way back to *A Nation at Risk* (1983).

During the pandemic, I worked in a school district's central office, and our imperatives were clear. We quickly scrambled all of our resources to do the following in this order:

1. Provide meals to families so children can eat.
2. Provide families with internet connectivity so children can access school and their families aren't cut off from important communications.
3. Provide teachers with the means to conduct school over the internet so children could keep learning during lockdown.

It wasn't a moonshot, but I was amazed at how innovative and efficient our district — like so many districts around Vermont — was in mobilizing to help families during that crisis, just as they had during Tropical Storm Irene and other tough moments for our state.

So what stories did we tell about the pandemic? Well, to start, not that one. The dominant narratives were about learning loss, about teacher burnout, about students being broken by the pandemic somehow. We shouldn't underestimate the damage caused by the pandemic — nor should we underestimate our communities' resilience. However, certain stories can shape our thinking in a way that actually does lasting harm.

Jess DeCarolis (RF09) worked as an Agency of Education Division Director during the pandemic, and many school leaders will tell you that her state-level guidance and hard work really helped our schools get through the crisis. I remember her saying to me, "Imagine you're a kid, and all you hear from the adults is that kids are messed up now. How does that make you feel? How does that help?"

In the months and years ahead, we're going to hear that the post office, social security, and public schools all don't work, but on most days, the reality for Americans tells a different story. Obviously, in order for public assets to be privatized, powerful people will tell a story of inefficiency and failure, so when it comes to Vermont public schools, get ready to hear a lot about declining test scores and rising costs. That will be the single story.

But what if Vermont teachers told some of the stories that get left out? There are so many amazing success stories in our school communities, and Vermonters need to hear more of them. Rowland Fellows play an important role here — think of [CRAFT](#) in Woodstock or [Dare to Be Me](#) at Hazen, for example. Filmmaker Ned Castle has also featured innovative work around our state to tell the story of the [community schools movement](#); talk to Matt DeBlois (RF09), Jess DeCarolis (RF09), Mary Schell (RF10), or Gabe Hamilton (RF15) to learn more.

We need to shore up public education in Vermont, in partnership with our successful traditional academies like Burr & Burton and St. Johnsbury — not pit communities against each other, not disparage our students, and not trash the whole system. Vermonters want

to improve our schools — not move fast and break things. In this moment, we need to challenge the narrative that schools need to be run like a business, by businesses. To not do so is a failure of imagination.

Along these lines, Abby Paige recently shared this Baratunde Thurston quote with me:

“The future we want is already here. The story we need we’re embedded within. We must tell it again and again. That’s how we make it true.”

Take care and see you soon,

Mike

P.S. Is AI really a story of “mid-tech”? Here’s an interesting perspective on [how we tell the story of AI](#) from an educator who is also a MacArthur Fellow.

P.P.S. If you see “message clipped” at the bottom of this newsletter, please click through! Depending on how many photos we have, Gmail will sometimes truncate this newsletter.

Rowland Foundation Updates

The 14th Annual Rowland Conference

Super Early Bird is Open! Pre-register now!



Rowland Foundation affiliates can [pre-register for the Annual Conference now!](#)

Baratunde Thurston's *How to Citizen* framework invites us to rethink what citizenship should be in our day and age. A prolific writer, comedian, and podcaster, Baratunde is the author of the New York Times bestseller *How to Be Black* and the host of the podcast *Life with Machines*, focused on the social impacts of AI. He previously wrote for *The Daily Show* and *The Onion* and hosted the PBS series *America Outdoors with Baratunde Thurston*.

We are thrilled that Baratunde will be our keynote speaker for the **14th Annual Rowland Conference, Thursday, October 30, 2025**. Super Early Bird pre-registration opens on April 4th for Rowland Foundation affiliates only.

In the meantime, feel free to propose a workshop and/or [share our call for proposals](#) with anyone you know who could provide a great conference workshop connecting to this year's theme.

Introducing the 2025 Rowland Fellows

New Fellows Orientation in Burlington



Our new 2025 Rowland Fellows spent the day together in Burlington with **Mike Martin & Abby Paige** for New Fellows Orientation. Seen here (left to right) **Matt Hennen, Jonah Ibson, Julia Beerworth, Anne Koplinka-Loehr, Becca Osborne, Danielle Berg & Jana Fabri Sbardellati.**

2024 Rowland Fellows

Cohort Meeting at Hartford High School



The 2023 Cohort of Rowland Fellows met at Hartford High School with **Senior Associate Jean Berthiaume** to share budget strategies as they come to the end of their first year as Fellows. Seen here (left to right) **Bill Prue, Beverly McCarthy, Sarah Marcus, Jean Berthiaume, Melissa Bushey, Melissa Wyman & Sandy Celauro.**

2023 Rowland Fellows

Cohort Meeting at Green Mountain High School



The 2023 Cohort of Rowland Fellows met at Green Mountain High School with Senior Associate Jeanie Phillips to collaborate on their culminating Fellowship work as they come to the end of the two-year cycle this spring. Seen here (left to right) **Jessica Kessler**, **Lindsay McQueen**, **Carrie Gilman**, **Chris Sheehan** & **Elizabeth Placencia**.

The New Teacher Fund

GSP Work on the Integrated Curriculum (EQS/IRIS)



Great Schools Partnership Senior Associate Emily Gilmore (RF17), seen here on the left, has been leading a team developing an Integrated Curriculum model for Vermont, as called for in Act 1 of 2019. She recently spent a day with Vermont teachers to develop units based on the instructional strategies called for in the new Educational Quality Standards (EQS) and IRIS Framework, including **Beverly McCarthy (RF24)** seen here on the right wearing her Rowland Foundation hoodie. This work is made possible by the New Teacher Fund, a donor-advised fund at the Vermont Community Foundation that receives support from the Rowland Foundation.

Celebrations



This month **Rowland Foundation Executive Assistant Abby Paige** is celebrating the publication of her bilingual book of plays, *Piecework / Travail à la pièce*, with a series of book launch events around Vermont and New England. The plays explore the Franco American experience and cultural heritage of the borderlands between francophone Canada and northern New England. [You can learn all the details on her website.](#)



Northfield Middlehigh School



Carrie Gilman (RF23) has been leading restorative practice work at Northfield Middle & High School through [her Fellowship work](#). She recently met with Great Schools Partnership Senior Associates Darthula Mathews, **Jeanie Phillips (RF14)**, **Erica Wallstrom (RF14)** & Erin Conley to explore options for a [Rowland Conference workshop](#) this fall.



Matthew DeBlois (RF09) took part in a panel presentation at the AEFP's 50th Annual Conference in Washington, DC. The panel presentation was entitled *Strengthening Educational Equity: Understanding the Potential of Community Schools in a Post-Pandemic World*. Matt serves as the building principal for Vergennes Union Elementary School. The school was awarded one of the original Act 67 Grants and continues its community schools work. He was fortunate to present with Jason DiGuilio, NESSP Principal of the Year, along with Peter Knox from UVM, Robert Shand from American University, Emily Germain from the Learning Policy Institute and Zitsi Mirakhur from the University of Kentucky. [Video of VUES Community School](#)

Gratitude



Mike Martin (RF09) was inspired to see Winooski students' art projects proudly displayed in Scout Coffee. He is grateful for Vermont teachers who go the extra mile to connect students with their wider community.

Courtesy Posts



Collaborative Practices for Equity

Sign up now for this amazing course taught by Jeanie Phillips and Aimee Arandia Østensen! This unique course offers school leaders the opportunity to design impactful agendas, engage in feedback sessions, practice collaboration strategies, and apply their learning to the work they are doing in their schools. A fierce commitment to educational equity and excellence will be at the core of all the learning participants will do. Priority is given to new Fellows and their Collaborative Work Group members, so space is limited. [More information here.](#) [Register here.](#)



[Braver Angels](#) is offering a free workshop at Harwood Union HS in Duxbury, VT on Saturday, April 26 from 9:00–11:00 am for those individuals who identify as having "blue-leaning" political views. *Depolarizing from Within* is designed to help lessen the effects of polarization that often occurs when we find ourselves in challenging political conversations. It introduces skills and techniques to help people reframe how we view "the other side" in the face of disagreements around politics. The strategies and techniques introduced in this workshop are helpful to enable us to conduct civil conversations with those with whom we disagree. The workshop will be facilitated by **Katherine Cadwell (RF16)** and Lincoln Earle-Centers, Braver Angels VT co-coordinators. [Register here](#) for this free workshop!