



Letter to Fellows

The Grammar of Schooling

August 2025

Dear Rowland Fellows,

I hope you are having a good summer.

Sometimes it feels like nothing ever changes in schools. Even as the news spins faster and faster, there's a sort of weird inertia in education. Looking back, I was a young teacher before schools were connected to the Internet, before email, before 1:1 programs, before social media and "smart phones", before Zoom, and, most obviously, before Chat GPT. Without a doubt, each of these waves of disruptive new technology wreaked major changes on our brains, relationships, pastimes, sleep, and self-concept... and yet, none of them really *transformed* schools as promised.

These new products have altered how students experience school, but not what some researchers call the *grammar of schooling*. As part of his case for deeper learning, [Jay Mehta illustrates the grammar of schooling here](#).

Here's another way to think about the grammar of schooling. For most students, school still consists of going to a specific set of rooms in a single building where a teacher trained in a specific content area gives you information from that discipline area, shows you how to develop some related skills and procedures, and rates your success (see [Freire's Banking Model of Education](#)). Most students and teachers are required to stay in that building from

roughly 8:00 am to 3:00 pm. In order to control large numbers of people in the same building, freedom of movement and speech is controlled and curtailed (see [William Glasser](#) or [Peter Gray](#)). The [physical spaces in schools](#) are mostly noisy and uncomfortable—lots of cinderblock, linoleum, laminate wood, metal, and hard plastic—and the long straight halls, stark commons areas, and double doors are like a softer version of prison, although many schools have “hardened” their facilities now in the wake of so many school shootings in the U.S.

However, the grammar of schooling is not just the environment and daily schedule, but also the beliefs and practices that dominate schools. For example, schools put much more energy into ranking and sorting students than they do developing each student’s unique gifts and aspirations. Even when schools don’t use [tracking](#) to sort their students, they are still sorted by various labels which shape their daily school experience: Honors Students, Multilingual Learners, AP kids, At-Risk Learners, Special Ed students, Tier 2 students, “high flyers”, “disengaged learners”, “oppositional students”... The extensive use of labeling young humans shapes both teacher and student expectations in powerful ways (see [Shalaby](#)).

And whether it’s a 100-point scale or a 4-point scale, we still tend to rate students comparatively, like on a bell curve, instead of a criterion-based system where the goal is for everyone to meet the standard. Of course, all this labeling and ranking goes into the mother of averages, the Class Rank, where all students of a particular grade are listed top-to-bottom by Grade Point Average. My point here is that all this labeling, ranking, and sorting requires resources that could have gone into teaching and learning. Over-evaluation actually leads to less teaching and high-quality feedback. In a different universe, our schools could focus more on learning than labeling. [Guskey observed](#) that our school structures are *mostly designed to select talent, not develop talent*.

What’s more, the cultural codes of school were defined by middle class white people for middle class white people. In this way, schools confirm, reinforce, and reproduce class differences, while posing as neutral arbiters of our meritocracy (see [Bourdieu](#)). Our students see through this. They know that the Game of School is not on a level playing field.

Perhaps the most unexamined aspect of the grammar of schooling in the U.S. is our supposed support for the democratic mission of school, even though *we don’t teach or practice democracy in the way we do school* (see [bell hooks](#) or [Dewey](#)). This is more than a hole in our curriculum. This disconnect between what we say and what we do undermines our credibility in the eyes of our students.

Even if they don't figure on Mehta's list, all of the above could be considered aspects of The Grammar of Schooling, in effect the hidden operating system of how we do school.

Why dwell on these familiar structures and practices? Well, because these are the things that largely define school, regardless of our technology. In fact, when you think about it, it's astounding how impervious the grammar of schooling has been to technological innovation, sort of like an unmovable, embedded code of school.

So what does actually make a difference for kids? Well, personally, I tend to think of Rowland Fellowship work right away: community-based learning, nature-based education, student voice & choice, authentic assessment practices, and restorative practices are all game-changers. When done at scale —and not as small alternative programs— these approaches intentionally disrupt the Grammar of Schooling. They change the way school feels to our young people. They also have cascading effects that ripple through the system in a way that shifts the culture and climate of schools.

All this to say, please keep innovating, Dear Rowland Fellows! And please always make sure that we are disrupting bad legacy practices as we do. **As Artificial Intelligence takes over more and more space in our lives, we need to keep nurturing human intelligence.** In order to effect real change in schools, we need to make sure that technology is working for us, and not the other way around. We need healthy, vibrant in-person learning communities. We need a curriculum with a human face.

Thanks for reading this far.

Take care and see you soon,

Mike

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

UVM Registration Opens on September 3rd



34 school teams have already pre-registered for the conference! It would appear that this year's theme, *How to Citizen: Engaging Students in Democracy*, is resonating with Vermont educators. Stay tuned for a preview of the complete conference program and its list of amazing workshops. **UVM registration will open on September 3rd.**

We are thrilled that Baratunde Thurston will be our keynote speaker for the **14th Annual Rowland Conference, Thursday, October 30, 2025** at the University of Vermont's Davis Center. His [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](#).

Barnet CWG at Clemmons Family Farm

Focus on Diversity, Community & Creativity



2024 Rowland Fellows Beverly McCarthy & Melissa Wyman have been leading efforts at the Barnet School Systems to “reshape systems and supports...so that our students can function in a culturally and racially diverse world”. As part of their work, they recently brought their Collaborative Work Group (CWG) to Clemmons Family Farm. They learned about the history of the farm and the Clemmons family, their programs and teaching artists, had a tour, and enjoyed the one day of sunshine that week.

Our 2026 DEW Scholars!

Diversifying the Educator Workforce



Congratulations to our new DEW Scholars! We are so glad to be providing support to these aspiring educators of color and appreciate their many contributions to Vermont public schools: **Tyler Boone** is doing a MEd at the University of Vermont for his Special Education endorsement; **Abel Alaniz** is starting Champlain College's Teacher Apprentice Program (TAP) for a double endorsement in Music & Social Studies; **Tim Vorachak** is enrolled in St. Michael's College's MEd program for his endorsement in Special Education; and **Rosa Atienza** (*above*), also enrolled in TAP, will be student-teaching biology, physics & chemistry at Burlington High School this fall.

The Integrated Curriculum for Vermont Educators

A New Great Schools Partnership Resource



Integrated Curriculum for Vermont Educators

Great Schools Partnership is excited to share the Integrated Curriculum for Vermont Educators (ICVE), made possible with generous support from **The New Teacher Fund**, a Vermont donor-advised fund established by the Rowland Foundation. [Explore the ICVE website](#) to see how the Education Quality Standards can be woven into your curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. Sample K-12 curriculum maps and unit plans have been developed collaboratively with Vermont educators across the state in English Language Arts, Essential Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. Keep a lookout for more information about opportunities to dig into ICVE and how it can be adapted to fit your school or district's needs.

Rowland Foundation Short Films

Featuring Our Fellowship Work in Vermont Schools



Ned Castle (Frames to Life) is working with Executive Director Mike Martin to produce a series of short films about the work of the Rowland Foundation in Vermont schools. Ned is seen here (*above left*) with Harwood Superintendent Mike Leichter who came to Burlington for an interview about the impact of Rowland Fellowships at Harwood over the years.

Rowland Foundation Staff

End of Year Meeting & Celebration



The Rowland Foundation Staff has an annual **End of Year Staff Meeting & Celebration** to connect, reflect, and celebrate the work we've accomplished together. This year the

discussion centered on support for Rowland DEW Scholars, our latest website improvements, our foundational course for new Rowland Fellows called *Collaborative Practices for Equity*, Fellow-Principal partnerships, and The New Teacher Fund grant strategies in partnership with the Vermont Community Foundation. Seen here in Burlington (left to right) Executive Assistant Abby Paige and Senior Associates Lori Lisai (RF15), Jean Berthiaume (RF09) & Jeanie Phillips (RF14).