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Case Study

Nov. 8th, 2015

Title: The Wayfinder Schools: Relational Learning, Restorative Justice and Community.

Location: Camden and New Gloucester, ME

Abstract: The Wayfinder Schools are a set of non-profit high schools that serves communities across Maine. These schools use relational education and restorative justice models to provide a trusting and healthy learning environment for at-risk teens. The curriculum includes many opportunities to work collaboratively with local community organizations to make concrete improvement in people's lives.

Keywords: Community school, social justice, restorative justice, community service.

Type of Case: Community School

The Coalition for Community Schools defines them as “both a set of partnerships and a place where services, supports and opportunities lead to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities...” While the Wayfinder Schools are not a hub for the community, their curriculum is based in learning and partnership in the community through work, service learning and collaborative projects.

Mission Statement: *“Wayfinder Schools offer relational learning programs that transform the nature of a high school education by providing students with the skills and experience necessary to discover their strengths, connect with their families, practice personal responsibility, and contribute to their communities, and which culminate in awarding a high school diploma from the State of Maine.”*

- Support high school aged students who are at risk of dropping out of traditional public school setting the opportunity to get their high school diploma.
- To stop the cycle of poverty that emerges when people lack a high school degree
- To use Restorative Justice practices to “reduce fear, anger and alienation experiences by both the victim and the offender”

Context:

The current Wayfinder Schools is a combination of two other long-standing programs in Maine. The Community School an alternative school in Camden, ME and the Opportunity Farm in New Gloucester, ME merged in 2011 and 2013 were re-branded Wayfinder Schools.

Timeline:

1910- Opportunity Farm founded in New Gloucester ME by F Forrest Pease. Residential home for boys (attended public school, but lived on the farm/did chores

1973: The Community School founded in Camden ME by Dora Liewow and Emanuel Pariser as a residential program for high school students.

1994: The Community School start of the Passages program for teen parents.

2008: Dr. Dorothy Foote becomes Head of the Community School.

2011: The Community School merges with/obtains the Opportunity Farms campus.

2013: Schools renamed to Wayfinder.

Operations:

Funding: As a 501-c3 they operate with a mixture of grants and individual donors. In addition to the Head of School, they have 2 development staff.

Partners: Local schools, community and social service agencies, local churches, local businesses and civic organizations. Partners at the state level include the Maine Department of Education, Maine Indian Education, and the Maine Office of Substance Abuse.

Staffing: 28 staff that includes administrative staff, residential program staff and teachers/educators.

Board: Have a 13 member Board of Directors as well as a 13 person advisory board and

Programs:

Residential Program:

- 8 students in Camden and 8 in New Gloucester campuses
- Core classes, daily chores, plan and prepare meals
- Student service projects with local community organizations, schools, senior centers, etc.
- Work program: student intern or work in local community from 9am-12am Monday-Thursday.
- Experimental Learning Expeditions

Passages Program:

- Home-based high school degree program for young parents age 14-20
- Student spend some time on campus, but mainly work one-on-one with teachers
- Includes capstone project with support of mentor

The primary focus of their education model is using principals of relational education, whereby all members of the learning community (students, teachers, mentors, parents) build trusting and supportive relationships. The schools focuses on helping to bring young people who have struggled back into the community and help them get their diploma. They use “resolution circles” as opportunities to develop healthy communication skills and solve problems/conflict. Many students come to the program after issues of substance abuse, crime, or other risky behavior. This program provides an alternative to the traditional criminal justice system.



Students at home after volunteering at the Camden International Film Festival.



Student mural project at the Sweetland School in partnership with the Sweet Tree Arts organization.

Assessment

Strengths:

- Long history of both programs at Opportunity Farm and the Community School; well-known and well-respected across Maine.
- Students receive a HS Diploma, not simply a GED.
- Uses restorative justice practices and social justice lens.
- Free for the students who need it

Weaknesses:

- Limited enrollment.
- Relies on grant funding and donations.
- Requires a high student to staff ratio because of residential programming.

Opportunities:

- Potential to expand programming, if not through a residential program, then by new partnerships.
- They have experience of taking on/merging with Opportunity Farm and could do again if there was a need/desire to expand their residential program.
- To be a leader in bringing restorative justice and resolution circles into high school setting.

Threats:

- Similar to the weaknesses, limited funding is always risky.

Lessons for Philadelphia

John Dewey's seminal work was on how to build an informed citizenry that will create a true participatory democracy. He dreamed that the education system would and could be the center for this type of democratic capacity building to happen. The Wayfinder Schools focus on activating a social justice mind-set as well as community service and collaboration. They are encouraged to solve problems not just in their own learning/living communities, but to support community work in Maine. They do this through a combination of the programming and resolution circles. They have partnered with elementary schools and senior living centers to create multi-generational collaborations. They have also hosted a group of Somali immigrant farmers from the Portland area to their campus at Opportunity Farm to exchange learning. This type of rich community partnerships and programming could be an inspiration to the green school-yards programs in Philadelphia. The Wayfinder Schools are also explicit about how providing at-risk young people with their high school diploma can help break cycles of poverty in Maine. I think that the Philadelphia program should decide how to frame their work, not just in terms of environmental quality and literacy, but also in terms of social issues.

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Wayfinder Schools Webpage: <http://wayfinderschools.org>

Photos from Wayfinder Schools Facebook Page:
<https://www.facebook.com/wayfinderschools/?fref=ts>