Peacham Elementary School: Building Connections

Reseacher’s Log, April 7, 2000, 3pm:
I walk in the building, turning right to see if the principal is in her office. She’s not, but Alfred is. He’s a little lamb in a pen, and a six-year-old boy is petting him. He asks me to help him fill the milk bottle so he can feed the lamb. When other children come clamoring into the office, they notice that Alfred’s tail is wagging, “because he’s so happy to be fed.” The first little boy knowingly explains, “His tail will soon fall off. Older sheep don’t have tails.” The children eye this expert respectfully while gently petting the lamb and voicing observations about the texture of his fur, how hungry he is, and how the milk will help him grow big. It’s just another day at Peacham Elementary School.

When asked what makes Peacham Elementary School a unique place, staff, students, and community members alike inevitably mention the way it feels:

When I came here for my first visit, when you walked in the building, it felt different. It felt really like – I don’t know what it felt like. But it felt warm, it was an open, inviting atmosphere. And I’ll never forget it.

The 2000 Peacham School Parent Survey results demonstrated that all twenty-eight parents who responded agreed with the statements that "the school is an inviting place" and "I feel welcome at Peacham School." Some parents included additional comments such as "Very friendly," "this is why we chose Peacham," "everyone happy/smiling," "teachers always friendly," and "caring, comfortable environment."

As an educational researcher who visited Peacham School often throughout the 1999-2000 school year, I would discover that this warm environment was created through a deliberate effort on the part of Peacham faculty and staff, students, parents, and community members involved in the school. Placing an emphasis on “school culture,”
the Peacham Elementary School principal believes that nurturing a community in which all members feel respected, cared for, listened to, and challenged, is an essential foundation for the learning process. It would be my task, among many, to discern and describe these unique qualities that make Peacham School a “special place.”

In some ways, the town of Peacham has changed little in the past century: a 1937 edition of *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State* described Peacham as a village of "Smooth-flowing hills, darkened by woodland patches surrounding the village with quiet seclusion...." Today, the description still fits. On my initial visit, driving up the long hill on Bailey-Hazen Road, I caught my first glimpse of the town's pastoral, serene beauty. Rising above the multi-hued autumn foliage, the white spire of the town's Congregational Church gleamed in the morning sunlight, and it was little wonder to me that Peacham Village is a popular choice for Vermont postcards. The community center consists of a general store (closed for the season during my visits), a post office, the historical society, and, a couple hundred yards down the road, the bumpy gravel driveway that leads to Peacham Elementary School.

While the picturesque charm of Peacham has remained throughout the years, little else in this town has stayed the same. According to the school's principal, most of her school's "fifty families go back one generation, ten go back many, and ten have moved here in recent years." While several working farms have been run by the same families for generations, Peacham has lately become a haven for professionals seeking to raise

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1 66% of the total surveys distributed were returned.
families in an idyllic setting. These outsiders arrive in Peacham with certain expectations about rural living. According to one newcomer, “these people [come] with high energies and very vivid ideals as to where they want to be and why they moved here. And mostly to get away from where they came – you know, it was moving away from something and coming to a place with certain perceptions and expectations.” One Peacham resident recalls:

Before I moved here, I sensed that the community was more stable. And only in the last ten years has it started to receive many, many more people from outside Vermont, in particular…. Things started to really move fast, a fast pace, really, about seven years ago. As far as socio-economic status, I really have no sense. I just know that there’s a mix. You’ve got a lot of attorneys that commute to Montpelier or wherever…. When we moved here, I definitely had the sense that Peacham’s much more liberal-minded than many of the [other] Northeast Kingdom communities. It’s a higher intellect, more liberal-minded, but you have your high-end income earners, and you have your low end. Some farms are left – maybe five or six. But I would say most of the people commute out of the town who work. And there are a lot of retirees.

Indeed, 1990 Census reports indicate that out of a town population of 627, breaking down into 230 households, only 38.1% of working adults are actually employed within the community. While the influx of out of state professionals in the past several years has boosted Peacham’s median family income to $35,533, placing the town 122 out of 252 in the state of Vermont, lower income families continue to struggle to eke out a living in this rural community.

Socioeconomic diversity is reflected in the town’s only public school, as well. 7.4% of Peacham’s families received food stamps in 1998-1999, while 26.2% of the children attending Peacham Elementary School received free or reduced lunch that year.
Although Peacham’s diverse socio-economic conditions create some tension in the community, residents generally seem to agree that Peacham is a unique place:

It’s a community where there’s a lot of support and love, and I sense not a lot of judging that I was afraid might have happened. And it’s a mixed bag of people. All those different kinds of talents and backgrounds.

[People perceive Peacham as] a caring community: …helping each other out, …concerned about their neighbors and how people are doing. I think generally people are very helpful and want to be helpful and …they consider their neighbors their friends.

Due to the town’s small size, Peacham Elementary School has traditionally been a focus for community activity. Once broken into several small one room schoolhouses throughout the village, the school in its present form was created when the community’s falling population rates necessitated one central building. According to one of Peacham’s older residents and former teacher:

[Historically] we had one-room schools all around. Actually, at one time, … Peacham was a town of 1400 people…. [now there are] 645 or thereabouts. It’s changing a little bit, because we’re getting some young families back. [Back then] there were one room schools, and each school was the community, within itself, and then it was part of the bigger community in which we did things together…. Then those small schools got too small. And one by one, these schools closed. I think when I was going to school, there were nine. And they folded gradually. And what they would do, they’d put the few kids from the ones that folded into a bigger one.

Perhaps attributable to the town’s small size, Peacham’s schools have a long history of community engagement. In this isolated rural village, school staff have learned to be creative and forthright in asking for community volunteers to help supplement school programming. A former teacher and principal at the school in the late 1960s recollects:

I had a wonderful staff. And we always were thinking up ways to teach the children in a better way…. Kids up here don’t get out in the sunshine enough. And so we thought if we could do something that was entirely different for those last two weeks [of the school year], we’d call it an end-of-the-year know your town program. We’d close the books, leave the regular school, including grades and grading and everything, and get them to know the history of their town, so we involved about nineteen to twenty people – townspeople – in this program, because we did crafts in the morning and [the students] wrote a play and produced
it, on the history [of the town].… And it turned out very beneficial, because it reached some of the kids who were sort of the foot-draggers in the ordinary education.

One of these end-of-year programs developed into an overnight nature trip to the Groton State Forest.

I am pretty much a naturalist…. It turned into a really good experience. We prepared for it as a nature trip. And I remember I had warned them that they might hear the Bard Owl, and I had the health nurse, one of my adults, go with me. And she and I had a camp together, because we… weren’t going to be able to sleep very much. Well, about two o’clock, the Bard Owl began, and you heard all of the kids – all the different kids – “Hey, there’s that owl [our teacher] said we’d hear! [Frightened noises]…. And then we climbed Owl’s Head – it was during the time the monksflower was in bloom, and the children were so afraid because the flowers came out, and the plants came out almost into the trail, that they were going to step on one – you know, and I was thrilled. And it turned out to be a great experience. But, we prepared like mad for it. These things take extra time – too much of it then was using page-by-page workbooks.

Today, Peacham Elementary School is housed in a small, one story, brick building. From the outside, the school appears quite drab: it sits rather forlornly off the main road, flanked by fields and supplemented with a large, open area for outdoor games and a few pieces of playground equipment. Serving children in grades pre-K through 6, Peacham’s student population lies at about 75, with 6 full-time teachers, one full-time principal, and several part-time faculty and staff. Indoors, the school’s ambiance is transformed: brightly painted turquoise, yellow, green, purple, and light blue walls are constantly adorned with ever-changing student displays. The principal’s office doubles as reception and is immediately on the right past the school entrance: in all my visits to Peacham, the doors to this bustling office were always open. The school houses five classrooms, each cozily cluttered with overflowing bookshelves, a “comfortable corner” furnished with
soft chairs and carpets for class meetings, and two to four large, round tables with child-sized chairs.

A spacious meeting hall triples as cafeteria with adjoining kitchen, computer lab, and pre-K classroom blocked off by moveable walls. Increasing enrollment over the past several years has caused a space crunch, and Peacham staff have been forced to be creative to accommodate the many activities and groups that meet here throughout the day. The school is completed by a nurse’s office doubling as space for the guidance counselor, a teachers’ room, a small room used for special needs and multi-purpose activities, and a makeshift enclosure set up in the far side of the school hall which functions as the office and classroom for the enrichment coordinator.

As a visitor to the school, I was struck by the informal and open atmosphere permeating the hall and classrooms: except during testing times, doors between classrooms are left ajar, with students often flowing from one room to another as they break up into different activities throughout the day. Given the general air of freedom here, it is interesting to note that students, for the most part, behave responsibly and respectfully with each other, their teachers, and the physical grounds. Beneath the inviting and casual ambiance, there runs a current of excitement: students say that learning at Peacham Elementary School is generally fun and exciting:

   All my teachers at Peacham made learning fun. They turned boring subjects into fun ones – made students interested and motivated.

   This year I’ve learned that school can be fun.
Peacham Elementary School hasn’t always looked or felt this way. The current principal was hired twelve years ago, and she recalls some aspects from that time.

Peacham was looking for a principal because of problems that were happening in its school. And they had had a lot of staff turnover. Over two years, they'd had everybody leave. And they had a principal who had personal problems that were impacting on school. And they had the special education situation that wasn't being tended to, so they had children whose needs were not met. And they had older students who were, in leaving Peacham School, who were not ready. To--not reading well, were not ready to be out in the seventh grade. So that motivated a large number of people in Peacham to feel sort of mobilized about their school...

I knew the school had some concerns and they wanted to work to do something about that. And at that same time, it happened to be the public school approval process. And that took place, all out, throughout Vermont-- but Peacham used the public school approval process in a really positive way to get a lot of community involvement. So, about sixty community members volunteered to participate in public school approval and work on various committees about public school approval, and through that they kind of redefined the kind of school they wanted and what they wanted for their kids. Rather than focusing on the problems they had, they stepped back and kind of dreamt a little bit about the kind of school they wanted.

Attracted to this community in which parents and other town members were unrelenting in their willingness to support and create school change, this former teacher accepted the challenge of leading the school into a new phase. Due to enormous staff turnover (all but one of the former staff resigned), the new principal was able to take an active part in hiring new teachers. Armed with a strong educational vision and supported by the community, the hiring committee and principal were able to select new teachers who echoed their needs. One teacher hired during this phase reflected that:

When they hired [the new principal], basically, her first few years [consisted of] hiring people to fill the team of people that she knew would help with the vision that she could see, and she definitely had a vision of knowing that the team had to work well together in the school, but also the need for the school to tie in with the community.

Another responded:
I think that they were looking for people who were sort of naturally good at being with kids and people…. I think they also started looking at how people would work together. So once they’d hired a few, I think they looked at those and looked at, “Well, how – how would she work with this group?”… So not only were you hired based on your teaching abilities and… your expectations and your philosophies – I think you’re also hired based on how you would get along with the rest of the staff… how you would be able to work with those people.

In the first years after the school-wide staff turnover, school faculty, community members, and students worked hard to reform and “reinvent” their school. Prior years of low staff morale, and little community involvement had resulted in unruly students, uninspiring physical surroundings, and academic laxity. According to the principal, this decaying school culture took a number of years to turn around:

[From] ’89 to about ’92, we were doing basic stuff, like programs in place and doing a better job with teaching and reading and being very strict disciplinarians. Running a tighter ship. And then around ’92, at that point, we put a lot of pieces together – things were shaping up. We did things that made the school look better. The school was cleaned up…. The school was a mess. We put the students to work on the walls, we had a new janitor, we did a lot of communication to parents, we put into place a lot of policy procedures – not heavy duty stuff, but handbooks, a lot of things in place that had been very sloppy before.

“School culture” is a term the current principal likes to use. She believes, as do her teacher colleagues, that a positive school culture is an essential foundation for student learning. From the time she was hired, this principal emphasized the importance of developing and nurturing a caring and respectful school community – among staff, students, parents, and volunteers. Of those early years, she recollects:

It takes a very long time to change a school culture. And it was a very dysfunctional school culture. And so some of the things we were able to do at the beginning were not the way the school is now. They were Band-Aids and fix-its; we had to be very different in terms of behavior and discipline, than what we are now. Because of the kinds of students we had and the kind of culture we had in the school. We had… to be a lot more – well, it’s very structured now, but we
had to be a lot more rigid – not structured, rigid in our approach to things than what we are now. Now we can be a lot more flexible. Still structured. Much more flexible.

As the 1980s came to an end, Peacham School began to undergo a process of redefinition and reform. Sixty community members, determined to create a better school for Peacham’s children, articulated a vision for the school. It reads:

Peacham School’s Vision
It is our goal to produce students who leave Peacham School truly “On Their Way to Everywhere.” To have students who can demonstrate they are:

Responsible Citizens
We learn to be socially responsible, consider choices, take risks, and show respect for others and ourselves.

Collaborative Workers
We learn to cooperate and work together as a team.

Effective Communicators
We learn to speak, write, and present information and ideas convincingly.

Complex Thinkers
We learn to reason, solve problems, and make decisions using information we have accessed or learned.

Self Directed
We learn how to learn and develop the attitudes needed to use and demonstrate our knowledge.

Producers of Quality
We learn to work hard; effort pays off and high standards are expected.

Community Contributors
We learn to understand and value the importance of our connection to the community and the world.

Emphasizing the core educational values of social responsibility, collaboration, communication, and community contribution as stated in the 1989 Vision statement, Peacham Elementary School has initiated a number of progressive projects in the past
decade to link student learning to community engagement and participation. When the new principal was hired about 12 years ago, she says there was little community involvement, and the town liked it that way: students were unruly, and as such could not be trusted to behave respectfully outside strictly controlled classrooms. The principal explains that when she was hired, the town was giving a significant percentage of its taxes to the school, and she felt unable to ask for more money. At that time, however, the school didn’t have a music program, or an art teacher, or a number of after school sports programs. Therefore, in lieu of money, the principal requested that community members donate their time, because, as she says, “of course we had to have a music program!”

A local resident accomplished in music volunteered her time once a week to start a music program, and other volunteers began to bridge the gaps. Over time, the school began to shape up, and community members realized that if they wanted the new successes to be sustained, they needed to invest in stable programs. In this way, several of these programs became stable and fully-funded elements of the school. As community members became more involved, the school community felt strongly that they needed to give back to the town in appreciation for all its efforts. This is how the strong ethic of community service has evolved in the past decade: as school staff and students search for ways to “give back” to the community which has historically been so supportive, the town has increasingly viewed the students as a valuable community resource. Peacham’s principal comments:

We had people come in and we went out, and it went well. And that has been developed to the point where they began to see the school as a resource. And that has really only happened in the last couple of years. Now they see kids as a resource…. They didn’t before. It took forever to get them to that point. But
now… there are certain people in town who – there’ll be a job at the historical society, or the selectman [will] have something that needs doing, and they will think to include kids in it, because they know kids are… going to learn from it. And it’s labor…. In a town of this size, they always need volunteers to do things. And kids can volunteer and do it responsibly – that’s great. And it’s teaching them how to be a community member, too. And just little… orchestrated events that went well, built upon each other, and over time, it’s changed.

Peacham Elementary School curricula and after-school activities cover a wide variety of programs emphasizing community engagement. These initiatives include collaborative efforts linking academic learning to community service, “curriculum of place” units in which students learn about the cultural history of their region, activities taking place in classrooms which help foster a sense of community within the school, and ongoing efforts to involve community members and parents in the school as volunteers. A brief summary of some of these initiatives are listed here:

“Getting to Know You: Connecting Students to the Wisdom of the Elders” was a collaborative project between Peacham School and FoodWorks. This project was designed to encourage interactions between students and the elders in their community, through the idea of "cultural literacy." The project designers define cultural literacy as:

1) passing down stories, skills, and knowledge from generation to generation;
2) developing an awareness, appreciation, and understanding of the heritage of the community;
3) a process for documenting a community's rich cultural traditions;
4) preserving the past;
5) integrating community wisdom into state and national standards and curriculum units.

Project designers, teachers, and community members cultivated cultural literacy among students by encouraging and facilitating elder efforts to share their wisdom, skills, and
traditions with children. Activities were organized around themes such as "stories and local history," and "crafts and environment." Science, language arts, social studies, and mathematics curricula came alive to students as they made connections between their experiences working with the elders and their academic studies. Successfully built birdhouses, orderly and vibrant vegetable gardens, and freshly baked bread provided tangible evidence that indeed students were learning from their elders.

The reciprocity of exchange was emphasized as students were encouraged to give back to their elders through a variety of community service projects. These include holiday caroling trips to elderly "shut-ins," weekly visits in which students read to elders, an "annual grandparents day", and a culminating celebration in which students made presentations of what they'd learned from each elder. These events provided elders with a sense of connection and appreciation from students, and taught them that they had much to learn from their youngest population, as well.

Project participants cited benefits to the cultural exchange as including: an increased understanding and appreciation between generations; a mutual recognition that elders and students alike are sources of inspiration and knowledge; elders gaining a sense of feeling useful, valued, and respected; students learn to interact with older people; students and elders feel connected which builds self-esteem; the creation of positive community relations; and a relevant and meaningful curriculum for students.
While this extensive program has not been repeated in recent years, meaningful connections with Peacham’s elders continue to flourish, through both school-wide projects and individual relationships. As the winter holiday season approaches, students begin preparing for the annual caroling trip to elderly residents. Students in the younger grades prepare for this excursion with their music teacher by practicing a variety of cheery songs. Their teacher coaches them for the experience by encouraging strong, loud, voices, eye contact, and big smiles. When asked why she and her students participate in this experience, one teacher replies:

I've always been interested in... the aging process, and how people, as they get older,... feel about themselves and the community, and-- I have a… couple of close friends that are now in nursing homes. And when I go to visit, I realize how important it is to make that connection, to-- I mean, just a short visit just enriches their lives so much, it just means so much to them to have someone coming to see them…. I think that it’s a small gift that you can give to someone who's a shut-in or who's needy or who may need help…. In my experience, I've found that as people get older they don't like to ask for help outside their immediate family. And so if you're not asking yourself, "What do you need or can I do something for you?" then you're not going to find that out. Because it's not easy to ask.

And I guess another piece would be-- you know, we teach a lot about community in elementary schools. And the classroom being a community and everybody has their job and their responsibility to themselves and to everyone else. And-- as we all get older, we're expected to be responsible in our own communities…. I think the time to begin that education is with small children because… they have such generous spirits. They are so willing to help each other and to help someone that they think might be in need…. I think that you have to teach it, I think that you have to show them that a simple thing like singing to an older person is an incredible thing to do…. They wouldn't know that, ordinarily, if you don't give them that experience.

When we go up into the village and sing to [an elderly resident], who was a very strong, active community member who had a stroke a number of years ago and now is paralyzed and can hardly speak, and they-- they go to sing to him and he weeps with joy-- it is so powerful, to them-- and to him-- that somebody cares. That there are people thinking about other people…. Children are so... innocent, and gifted in so many ways, and it just-- it's just a way to show them that they can become responsible and meaningful in their community in that way. So, I guess to make a long story short, I'm particularly interested in helping and doing...
service, myself, in communities, and, I think it's an important thing to teach children.

I myself had the opportunity to observe this annual caroling tradition this past winter. I remember vividly the elderly resident this teacher mentioned. The group of about 40 carolers huddled on the wooden wheelchair ramp outside this man’s house as he looked on from his hospital bed right inside the window. He wasn’t able to make any body movements or tap his feet in rhythm, but you could see from the gleam in his eye and the effort to move his lips in time with the beat that his mind and heart were engaged. At first, the kids were a little awed by the man a few feet away in the window, and their solemn faces studied him carefully. Within moments, their childish enthusiasm took control, and they sang joyfully, waving their arms in grand gestures to accompany the music. After a few songs, one of the boys carefully took a gift basket filled with cookies from his teacher to present to the honoree: this student was chosen because he was the man’s neighbor, and had become a special friend. Walking inside and laying the box down on the kitchen table, the young boy ran over to his friend and threw his arms around him. Unable to reciprocate in kind, the elder kissed him emotionally on the cheek, murmuring as best he could his words of affection. Ordinarily something of an emotional stoic, I admit I was moved to tears by this caring exchange. Classmates waited quietly and respectfully, observing the scene through the window, and as we left, we all waved goodbye as our elderly friend smiled broadly. It wasn’t only the students who experienced something profound and meaningful that day.
Sometimes, particularly in the younger grades, community service-learning projects spontaneously emerge as teachers and students respond to events or people in the community.

We [have] found that, particularly with, and I don’t know if this is the grade levels, or if it’s just personality, or the experience of teachers, but certainly K-3, [community service-learning] is automatically included in everything they do, and they really think of that, and it makes sense…. It’s automatic, you know, they’re learning, it’s obvious…. In the younger grades, you can get something [to] happen, like, someone will say that a certain older person is sick and they will all of a sudden come up with something to do for that person. Writing them stories, or sending them flowers, things like that.

While Peacham Elementary School emphasizes service, its main community-oriented curricular focus lies in what is often called “Curriculum of Place.” As a “founding member school of the Vermont Rural Partnership (VRP), a coalition of 18 small rural Vermont schools,” Peacham Elementary commits itself to the shared vision of VRP schools:

- To develop “curriculum of place” – locally developed curriculum tied to Vermont’s Framework of Standards which builds on the heritage, culture, and environment of the community.
- To develop youth leadership by promoting respect, responsibility, teamwork and cooperation amongst youth and their community. Developing participatory and leadership skills in youth while promoting civic involvement.
- To develop assets in youth by promoting reciprocal relationships within the community and helping children learn to thrive in their community.
- To document stories of youth and community interactions and analyze data gathered through the work.ii

Peacham School’s curricula are rife with “curriculum of place” initiatives, from kindergarten to sixth grade. In the lower grades, the 1/2/3 multiage social studies curricula follow a three year cycle that begins with a unit on “the first peoples of Vermont – the Abenaki.” Teachers in these classes collaborate with the enrichment
coordinator and FoodWorks to supplement classroom studies with an in-depth, experiencial study of Abenaki ways of life. Peacham’s 2000 Report Card summarizes last fall’s activities:

We dove headfirst into our study this year by building an Abenaki longhouse. This has become, and continues to be, an outdoor classroom. By creating the actual structure, digging a three sisters garden, cooking native food in the longhouse over a fire pit, sharing stories, and learning some of the language and customs, the students have had practical, hands-on experience as to what life might have been like as an Abenaki. The study continues throughout the seasons, ending with planting the three sisters garden (corn, beans, and squash), in the spring.

These Friday afternoon activities were reinforced and supplemented by teachers throughout the week with follow-up writing, activities, and discussions in the classroom.

In the 4/5/6 Multiage classrooms, students studied Vermont history this year, encouraged by their teacher to make connections between their historical findings and their present-day experiences. Students investigate research topics of their own choosing in a variety of ways: reading archives from the Burlington Free Press, interviewing Peacham “local experts,” and traveling to sites of political and cultural interest, such as the Statehouse, and the Athenaeum.

Perhaps the most popular of the “learning about community” initiatives undertaken at Peacham School is “Mini-REAL.” Described as “our simulated community curriculum that integrates mathematics, economics, artistic creativity, social studies, and entrepreneurship…. Students in grades one through six will start their day in a Mini-REAL component. Each student will learn job-related skills while working
collaboratively to provide a valuable service to the Peacham Mini-REAL community. Community institutions included the Community Bank, the Artisans’ Guild, the Feed, Read, and Seed Café, the Town Clerk’s Office, the Newspaper, the Justice Department, Law Enforcement, and the Student Center. Curious about this “mini” community, I showed up bright and early one Tuesday morning in April, during the last week of the project. Here is what I wrote in my notes that day:

First stop, Clerk’s Office, to register as a visitor, receive my “Guest I.D.”, and a generous tourist allowance for the day. I spy a pint-sized law enforcement officer in the hallway as I struggle with my badge. I’ve heard horror stories about visitors scornfully cited and deprived of their allowance for forgetting to show their identification, so I hastily affix it to my sweater in plain sight. The officer squints at me suspiciously, but lets me pass without any altercation – this time. Next time I’ll remember to fix my badge BEFORE I leave the Clerk’s Office – this is one tough town.

In the Justice Department, two reporters rush in for recent court news. They are told about all outstanding citations (names are kept anonymous, of course), and that a court hearing will take place on Thursday. Simultaneously, one clerk prepares paperwork for subpoenas. Having visited just last Friday afternoon when students were particularly boisterous, I am struck by how well-behaved, engaged, and mature all the students are. It comes naturally to them: when handed adult responsibilities, the ability to make choices for themselves, and respect, they respond with maturity and capability.
I become aware of my stomach rumbling. Looking into my pocket, I realize I’ve got plenty of money for breakfast at the café, and mosey off in that direction, making sure I stay on the right side of the law by walking slowly through the hallway.

As I enter what is usually the school cafeteria, I am amazed by its transformation. The Feed, Read, and Seed Café is in full swing. Candles and tablecloths adorn each table, and pleasant music flows from the speakers. Polite, smiling waitresses (yes, they’re all girls) bring menus, and offer coffee to the old folks and juice to the others. I sit down, ask for cream and sugar, and glance around at the scene. Bookshelves set up in the corner are available for browsing, and seeds for various plants and flowers are for sale with detailed instructions on plant care attached. I notice out of the corner of my eye that my waitress is patiently, but definitely, awaiting my order (after all, the faster the turnaround, the more tips), so I take time to scrutinize the menu.

Read, Feed, and Seed Café Menu
Croissanwich
Egg McPeacham
Breakfast Burrito
Toasted Bagel
Muffin of the Day (baked fresh every morning)
Assorted Danishes
Choice of Pancakes or French Toast
Cheese Omelet with Homefries and Toast
Cereal
Fresh Fruit
Juice, Coffee, Tea, or Cocoa
I can’t make up my mind, so I ask the waitress what she recommends. “People seem to really like the Egg McPeacham and the Breakfast Burrito,” she says. I go with the Egg McPeacham, hand the waitress my menu and thank her for her help, and sit back to sip my coffee. Soon I hear a loud disturbance from the kitchen.

It seems that one of the cooks has put muffins in the oven and then proceeded to go on break, without making any plans to take them out when done. The head chef (usually known as the cafeteria cook) calls out into the café that the muffins are about to burn. The guilty cook replies from one of the café tables that he is on break eating his breakfast. “Too bad,” yells the head chef, “they’re about to burn.” The cook runs into the kitchen, whips the muffins out of the oven, and returns to his seat to finish his eggs before they get cold, but the head chef isn’t finished with him yet. “Hey, you’ve left a mess in here!” The cook groans, “I’m eating!” But duties are duties, and this cook has learned a lesson about responsibility he won’t forget, as he glumly leaves his breakfast uneaten and heads back into the kitchen to clean up.

I can see why the Café is the most popular place in Mini-REAL this year. I munch on a delicious “Egg McPeacham” and fresh coffee, relaxing to soothing jazz and the soft murmur of conversation. The clientele spans a broad range of ages and interests – school staff pop in for a quick muffin, Mini-REAL participants like to come here on break, and I notice a few visitors like myself,
many of whom are parents and school volunteers. Just like many “real” communities, the café functions as the town hub, providing an inexpensive and cozy place for friends to meet, business deals to be made, and people to relax. Like towns everywhere though, there is much to be done, and at 9am, Mini-REAL comes to a close for the day, and Peacham School is back to its regular schedule. Mini-REAL is regrettably left behind until tomorrow morning.

While students busily explore the facets of community life IN the school, Peacham teachers, staff, and community volunteer work hard to connect learning experiences to the real world, as well. Peacham’s principal explains her philosophy of community engagement this way:

You can call it service-learning,… you could call it school-to-work, you could call it experiential learning…. There’s lots of things you could call it, and the label would probably fit. But [for] me, it’s learning that is involved with the real world. So, you learn in a context, and if you can make that context real and active, then you’re going to internalize it. It’s going to be more meaningful to those kids, when they’re dealing with real problems…. When kids know what they’re doing is something important that’s useful, they’re just so much more engaged in it than…. They have so much more power in the learning than when it’s just something… more abstract. That doesn’t mean you can do everything that way, or that that’s the way all kids learn, or that’s the… only way to do it. But… it brings learning to life…. I also think it’s really important, particularly in rural Vermont… the more people they’re exposed to, the more diversity you can try and expose them to, the better. Because they may or may not grow up to stay in Vermont. And they are somewhat isolated in their viewpoints, or the way they think things work. So to keep them open-minded is pretty important.

According to one of Peacham’s teachers, parents and community members become involved in the school partly because they want to support their children’s education.

I’ve been here for eleven years, so I know this community really well, but I think it’s unique. I think that parents and community members really care about the education of their kids here, and enjoy being part of the process and learning
along with us. So, it doesn’t seem like we do much without being in some consultation with some group in the community. That doesn’t mean that everybody appreciates everything that we do every minute, but in terms of the projects that we’ve done and the parental support that we’ve had, I think it’s pretty powerful.

A Peacham elder active in the school suggests that the reciprocal nature of community involvement is an important aspect of this connection.

There’s quite a lot of community involvement. Both the community here, because of this program that I helped start [Getting to Know You: Connecting Students to the Wisdom of the Elders]. And partly because children go out in the community and they’re giving back to the community,… and they’re giving a lot. For instance,… there are a couple of girls [who] go to the library every week, and give two or three hours… right after school. There are kids who can, who will go, for instance, last spring, a bunch of kids with a teacher came to my house and washed my windows, on the outside. Like they had heard me say “I’ve got to get at washing my windows on the outside somehow…. I don’t know if I can do it or not. You know? And… it’s always there. There are… all kinds, those are just two examples, and they are there all the time…. Here they’ve been nurtured by the community and the community has been nurture by them.

Teachers at Peacham work hard to foster relationships with parents of their students, as well as members of the community. Because the school is small, and teachers often have students for more than one year, there is greater opportunity to get to know parents. One teacher comments:

I have a great relationship with the parents of my students. And because you have kids who pretty much start kindergarten here and go through sixth grade, and we’re so small,… and many times we have their children for two years… I’ve even had some for four. You develop these relationships that are really special. And they last a long time. I have some parents that I highly respect and consider friends, who are very important to me.

Most parents I spoke with agree that teacher—parent communication is a strength at Peacham. Results from the recent Peacham School Survey for Parents indicated that they feel they “have good access to and communication with [their] child’s teacher” (24 out of
Teachers encourage parental involvement for two reasons: first, because it helps parents understand their child’s educational process and encourages them to become an active participant, and also because all parents have unique skills and talents that can be of benefit to the children if they agree to volunteer. Many of the volunteers at Peacham Elementary School are either parents of current students or have been parents in the past: these volunteers coach sports programs, lead a variety of Friday afternoon Enrichment programs such as Drama and Tai Kwon Do, or volunteer as teacher assistants in the classroom or on special field trips. One teacher explains:

> We have an incredible number of parent volunteers who teach—coach basketball and do after school programs, and people are very generous with their time, and willing to share their expertise with the kids, which, you know, of course, we can’t always provide. So they are always, it seems to me, offering their skills and expertise to us, here.

Often, teachers take part in actively encouraging and recruiting these parent volunteers:

> I like to find special skills that people have… like, I have a student, a new student in my class this year, whose mother is a hand-weaver, and I’m a hand-weaver and I’d like to have the kids do weaving, and… I’d love for her to come in and be the expert to teach the kids something that she knows – it’s her profession.

Another teacher explains her method of recruitment:

> I’ve tried to get parents to come in… to help with other projects. And one of the things I try to do with the community is send [a letter saying] “This is what we’re going to work on. If there are any of you who have knowledge or interest or experience, would you be interested in coming in?

Depending on the number of parents who work outside the home, parental involvement often fluctuates from year to year, and classroom to classroom. One teacher explains that...
she has a scarcity of parent volunteers in her classroom this year because “they all work full-time jobs.”

Peacham Elementary School maintains an open-door policy in which parents are welcome to tour the school and visit the classroom at any time. Teachers and staff continually and explicitly encourage parents to become involved in whatever ways they feel comfortable with. The message from the principal in Peacham’s 2000 Report Card states that the staff hopes [the Report Card] “will give those of you who do not have the opportunity to see our school at work on a regular basis, insight into the school lives of our community’s children…. If this information piques your curiosity, you are invited to visit, take a tour, or contribute in some way to the children’s lives by volunteering your time. Community interest and involvement is always encouraged at our school.”

Aware that many parents simply do not have the time to take active part in the school community, teachers strive to keep them informed about their children’s progress and school activities through other means. One teacher reflects on her efforts to foster a relationship with parents:

[It takes] a lot of communication. And a lot of sharing of what I do. I think it’s really important, especially now, with all the standards and expectations that kids have – even younger students – that parents understand what school is like now, and that you’d be able to explain and you have to do it over and over again, but explain the importance of what you’re doing and why you’re doing it and why it’s different. Why you need to do it the way you’re doing it now as compared to how they learned or the settings that they learned in. I think that people know what they know from their own experiences, and so even though a lot of times you think they understand, they might not. And so I think it’s just constant communication. And getting them to observe while you’re teaching, and explaining at the same time, and having them spend time with their child in school really helps. Helps the understanding and that communication.
This teacher’s comments suggest an increasing perception that some parents are concerned about the methods teachers use to instruct their children. Peacham School makes no apologies about its progressive pedagogy. Indeed, concerns from some parents that not having “desks in rows” and a lack of “teaching the basics” have long echoed in Peacham’s history. A retired teacher who taught in the 1960s elucidates on her perspective of the tensions these conflicting philosophies bring:

[Some people] don’t understand the freedom that children have in the modern day school – they’re not sitting in rows. You don’t get your knuckles rapped if you do something wrong, as you do in schools where the nuns are…. It is much more regimented…. One person was worried about discipline… always is. Another one,… retired businessman… [says that education] should be a corporate business.”

In the past year, Peacham School faculty have sensed that there is an increasingly vocal segment of the community that are not in accord with the vision that Peacham faculty and staff have been working with for the past several years. The school’s principal believes that her mission is to carry out the vision of the school that was created by the community in 1989, when she was hired, but that it has recently become apparent that not all parents are satisfied with the way the school is operating. She explains that “Peacham is now in a crisis situation because the ‘mandate’ given 10-12 years ago is no longer what the community wants. New people have moved into town and need a common vision for the school. Believing that schools ought to carry out the mission created by the community, but also that the community then must fulfill its responsibility by affirming and supporting the school, Peacham faculty and staff have come to realize, in the past
year, that perhaps accordance between the school and community has eroded in recent
days. One teacher explains:

I think that [the community’s perception of the school] has changed a little, and I think that people who are here when the change took place ten years ago,… all had a common philosophy about what school should be. And people who are from families who have lived here for a lot of years carry that same sort of philosophy. I think people who have moved to town recently… many of them don’t know the history or don’t agree with the history, and I feel as though they’re trying to change things, when perhaps they haven’t taken the time, themselves, to understand where it’s come from. And I think as being new to town, that’s sort of their job to find out.

Another teacher reflects that, while faculty and staff try to include all community members in the school, there are many people who remain uninvolved and uninformed.

I think that the community is very supportive of the school, as a whole…. I guess I think that their perception is positive. But I also think that that perception is very elusive. I don’t know that they really have a good reason why they’re supportive – I mean, we try to do a lot of outreach… but you’re only reaching a small percentage of those people…

Within the past year, Peacham faculty and staff have felt increasing negativity within the community towards the school and its leadership. While believing that this dissatisfaction is the result of a small, but vocal, minority, Peacham’s faculty and staff have felt under attack, and consequently have become defensive of their philosophies and practices of teaching. Desiring to confront these problems in a constructive manner, Peacham School embarked on a grant-funded process this year, facilitated by the Snelling Center of Government, to involve community members and parents in a review of the school’s 1989 vision statement. Peacham’s principal hopes that this process will engage members of the community who feel disenchanted with the current system, and bring about community consensus and support for the school.
After publicizing the first meeting, Peacham’s principal and staff have taken a back seat in the process, believing that it is the community’s responsibility and privilege to inform school faculty and staff on the direction the school should take. After the first meeting, the “Community of Purpose” group established its own Committee, comprised of town residents. This group worked diligently to spread information about the “Community of Purpose” meetings, and invite all community members, especially parents of current and future students, to attend. Postings were put up in the school and throughout the town inviting residents to attend any of a series of 13 “kitchen meetings” to voice their concerns and hopes about Peacham School. The open invitation included the following description:

Please – Give Us Your Thoughts

A group of Peacham residents has come together to devote time, energy, and ideas to clarify the community’s vision for the Peacham Elementary School. Our immediate goal is to create a mission statement for the school reaffirming or revising the values contained in the vision statement created in 1989.

To that end, we are holding a series of “kitchen meetings” where residents can gather in small groups to discuss their views of the mission of the Peacham Elementary School. At least two members of the organizing group will attend each of the meetings. After the kitchen meetings, we will hold a public meeting to draw on the ideas that come out of the smaller meetings and to create a mission statement to present to the school board for their consideration.

We hope you will sign up for one of the following kitchen meetings to be held in the home of gracious volunteers.

While this process is still ongoing at the time of this report, participants involved in the “Community of Purpose” process generally feel it has had a positive effect on school—community relations. One community member comments:

This mission statement process is doing wonders for making people feel like they’re being heard. And making people feel… that there’s openness to change,
if needed. And letting them understand that the school really does care about what they have to say, and they really will be involved in the near future, you know, changes down the road… yet, helping them understand that there is a process by which the school operates. And they have to learn to trust the administration and the staff to do their jobs. I mean, that’s something I keep trying to stress to them…. I think what’s important is to define the roles of the administration, the staff, the school board, the superintendent’s office, the supervisory union; how people really understand what each entity has the authority to do, is expected to do, and where the limitations are…. I think we need to continually be educated about that.

Some concerns have arisen in the past year over the quality of civil discourse in the community. School personnel and supportive community members have expressed frustration that some discontented parents and community members have not communicated their concerns in a direct and constructive manner.

In a staff meeting, some teachers commented:

- It’s my personal wish that the community would treat us the way we treat each other and the way we teach our students.

- These problem parents aren’t modeling good behavior for their kids – they’re not working together to solve problems and make the situation better for their kids.

- Sometimes I feel that, as opposed to the past, some parent volunteers are just there to watch – “vigilantes” – it makes me feel very defensive.

- I think we’re a school for all kids, but we’re not a school for all parents, and that’s why we’re here [working on the Community of Purpose].

Some community members and school staff feel that those unhappy with the school are a small, but vocal minority. Responses to the School Parent Survey include the following comments:

- How can we squelch the Eeyores of Peacham who are so unhappy they complain about everything?

- Put into perspective negative energy of a disgruntled few.
However, some Peacham residents have reflected that some parents and community members feel disempowered and disregarded, as if their perspectives are not valued by the “mainstream” school of thought. Several community members have expressed concern that Peacham faculty, staff, and community supporters are not open to differing perspectives on educational issues.

Feeling as though they are “under attack” by a small percentage of the community, Peacham teachers often respond defensively to criticisms and suggestions for change, even when expressed through direct channels. One evening in the spring, parents and community members were invited to an open showing of “Claire’s Classroom” at the school, a documentary of a progressive teacher and her classroom. After the showing, participants were invited to share in a discussion of what they had watched. Some participants express concern that progressive methods such as those demonstrated in the video, and practiced at Peacham, don’t emphasize covering the academic “basics” – such as science, math, reading, and writing.

One parent commented that the defensiveness of the staff makes her reluctant to voice her concerns because she doesn’t want to add to the pressure they feel. She feels that if people don’t “buy into the program” then they don’t have a voice. When another participant asked why these people who feel marginalized didn’t come to the movie and weren’t attending the “Community of Purpose” “kitchen meetings,” this parent conjectured that “they don’t feel empowered, like they can make a difference.”
However, many of those involved in the “Community of Purpose” have been happy with the diversity of opinions expressed in meetings, and believe that this process has helped many of the previously “silent discontents” give voice to their concerns. Minutes from several of these “kitchen meetings” have indicated that some parents and community members desire greater communication between the school and community, and more inclusion and affirmation of differing perspectives. Responses from these minutes include:

School needs to listen to the community more. Make parents feel that what they say has validity, and help parents understand the constraints placed upon the public school.

If you disagree, then you are selected out of the process…. A lot of views of this town… need to be acknowledged and heard if not adhered to.

You’re not going to say what you want to say if you feel your voice has no weight. Don’t just try to change my opinion -- [I] feel like I’m not being listened to.

[There is a] very strong feeling [that it is] impossible to get things changed.

[I] try to get involved in things but give up.

One primary goal for the “Community of Purpose” meetings has been the deliberate attempt to reach out to marginalized parents and increase involvement in the school. Improving the quality of discourse about educational concerns has been emphasized, as well. A “Community of Purpose” committee member explains:

There are ground rules that we established for the kitchen klatch meetings, obviously, because the mission of the kitchen klatch meeting is to create some good sound-bytes for a mission statement. You need to have ground rules to conduct a meeting in an effective, efficient way. For the most part, those kitchen klatch meetings have been really positive…. [We] try to channel negative energy into positive, productive energy.
As a member of the school board and an active participant in the “Community of Purpose” meetings, one parent stresses the importance of direct communication.

I personally am really interested in making sure that when an individual comes up to me as a school board member and voices an opinion that it be their opinion... and not to come forth and say things like, “there are a lot of people who say…” or “I heard…” or one of those ambiguities that also implies that there’s this larger body, this majority out there which is a very threatening kind of approach. I am hoping that I can stay on top of this one, because if someone comes up to me and starts off by saying “There are a lot of people out there…” I hope I have the presence of mind to always catch it and say, “I don’t want to hear about anything but what you think. And the other people who – if there are other people out there who feel that way, they need to come to me direct and talk.

The involvement and support of community members has been a crucial component for Peacham School’s success. The current efforts to widen the scope of community participation is a recent addition to long-standing efforts on the part of Peacham faculty and staff to collaborate with the town in the education of their children. Peacham’s teachers and principal emphasize the need to identify a few community members who are interested in working with the school and nurturing ongoing relationships with them. These community members, while active as volunteers themselves, also serve as liaisons to the community. They help recruit community volunteers from their own lists of friends and contacts in the town, and they also help to spread information about school issues and policies. One particularly active community member is an elder in the town, as well as a former teacher/principal at the school. Throughout the years, she has regularly volunteered in classrooms, nurturing relationships with individual students and helping with class projects. A tiny, genteel, woman with white hair, sparkling blue (?) eyes, and a ever-beaming smile, this volunteer radiates love and energy. A frequent chaperone on school trips, she scolds children who are acting mischievously just about as
often as she pats them on the back when they are behaving. On school field trips, when energy levels are high, this fiesty volunteer has to keep on her toes. When asked what impact she thinks she has had on the students and the school, she replies:

I think they – I think they – well, I get – I get hugs. You wouldn’t believe. I get welcomed here – it’s wonderful for me, the reactions I get from students. Lots of times, if I go [to the cafeteria] when they’re having lunch, they’re arguing about… whose table I’m going to sit at.

Asked how her involvement with students has impacted her personally, she reflects:

There’s a love between us… from them to me, and me to them. And it probably started from me, but… for an older person, it is wonderful to have this connection with children, because suddenly, you’re at a stage when you’re having to search for reasons for being. The rest of the time, it’s been, “Oh, I’ve got to do this, and this and this and this. Suddenly, if you don’t search for those, you’re sitting in front of a TV feeling sorry for yourself, which is completely a waste. Because… as long as you can get one foot ahead of the other, you have something to give. And you’d better make the most of it, because every day is precious – life is a gift. And you’d better make the most of it!

Fostering relationships with community members who become “school liaisons” eases the burden of recruiting new volunteers for school/community projects. Furthermore, school liaisons often develop in-depth understandings of school policies and practices which they can communicate to other town residents. In this way, community liaisons become school advocates, disseminating information about the school throughout the town and identifying, and often helping to resolve, community questions and concerns.

Community members who function as school liaisons often work diligently to keep the lines of communication open between the school and community. One active participant who has recently been voted to the school board stresses the importance of community outreach and conscious efforts to give all parents and community members the
opportunity to be involved in the school and feel included in the process. She explains that one reason she likes to participate involves her concerns about open and continuous dialogue:

Communication – keeping the lines of communication open and not closing them down. When I was a parent and with PTG [Parent-Teacher Group], I was heavily involved…. I like to make people feel like they are included in everything that goes on. And I want to make sure that everyone gets all the information they need to feel they’re included. To feel they’re a part – even if they don’t attend the meetings. So that there’s a perception that they’re part of the community. And to never let that waiver. As I understand it, this year there’s been some breaking down in the communication for one reason or another and one of the reasons I wanted to get on the school board was to put out there that – I think that people know me and probably voted for me because of my bent towards that anyway, and so it’s going to be one of my focuses. [sic] To make sure that that communication stays open. To make sure that people feel like they’re heard, to really try to continue to try to be a good listener.

This school board member explains her commitment to community-wide participation in the school as follows:

It’s within [the school’s] best interest to be open to anyone who has input. For a couple of reasons. Number one, they have a vested interest – they’re putting money into the school – it is a public school. And number two, because there are a lot of people out there with some fantastic ideas. And if you’re not open to those ideas, you may be closing yourself off to some incredibly wonderful, exciting possibilities. So it doesn’t take a wizard to figure out, you know, that you should be open-minded…[chuckles] And especially in this community, where… everybody comes from so many walks of life…. There are some pretty incredible people out there. It behooves us to be open and listen to what they have to offer…. Anything other than that, in my mind, begs to be labeled as… someone who’s fearful of something, and that’s not a good place to start from…. If you’re strong where you are and [in] what you are doing, then you shouldn’t have to worry about… constructive criticism or any other kinds of input that comes…. [This school is] strong,… and not only is it strong, it’s so strong that it’s… an exemplary institution.

While Peacham School encourages community participation, many faculty, staff, and community members stress that clear lines need to be drawn in which the community and school board leave issues of daily school management and teaching practice to the
principal and teachers at Peacham School. Peacham’s principal suggests that
community-based learning projects require a certain amount of autonomy on the part of
school personnel if they are to develop these kinds of projects. Formal school policies
and procedures often serve to hinder the efforts of teachers to take students out into the
community for special learning projects. She explains:

I think it’s important that school boards have real important say on a lot of things,
but not on some of that nitty-gritty kind of management stuff. They don’t have
the time for that, and they don’t always have the knowledge and experience, and
that can hold things up. I think there should be more risk-taking in many schools
where they just get on with it. And often, they put barriers in their own way by
being formal about something.

Many community members echo this emphasis on “letting the teachers do their job.”

One town resident comments:

[The community should] trust in the school board…. Trust in professionals to do
their job…. Trust in the school board to be hiring competent professionals. And
then let the professionals do [their] job and not second-guess what their job is.
Just as [community members] would not want someone second-guessing what
they do from nine to five or eight to five every day.

The strong leadership at Peacham is often cited as one of its greatest strengths, both
within the school and the greater community. Teachers, parents, and community
members stress the importance of a principal with strong leadership skills and a coherent
educational vision. Without a principal committed to community-based learning,
teachers and community volunteers agree that these sorts of projects would be almost
impossible to implement and sustain. One teacher explains:

Teachers have to be committed to doing [community-based learning]. [The
principal] knew the kind of person that would be needed to do those things…. That’s really important. You’ve got to have a leader that agrees with that. Even
if all the teachers… want to do [community-based learning], if the administration
doesn’t, it’s not going to work…. You’ve got to have the support to realize that
those things are important.
Another teacher explains that the principal’s strong leadership is tempered by an insistence on collaborative organization, and that this is an essential component to community service-learning in which teachers must make links with one another and community members. At Peacham, the emphasis on a supportive and caring school community is made on all levels of interaction. Respectful, collaborative relationships are encouraged, not only among students, but between teachers and students, and faculty and staff as well. This teacher explains:

The culture that the kids feel and the culture that the kids are a part of came from the culture that [the] staff... put together.... When I came here for my first visit, when you walked in the building, it felt different. It felt really like – I don’t know what it felt like. But it felt warm, it was an open, inviting atmosphere. And I’ll never forget it, because… I think that the way we treat each other, the way we’ve developed as a staff, in terms of respecting each other,… is the basis of what we’re asking our kids to do…. We really try to respect each other and listen to each other’s opinions. And that doesn’t mean we always agree. We definitely have some difference of opinion on different things, but we’re able to figure that out and work it through together. That’s basically what we’re trying to teach our kids…. I think that you have to do that modeling. And you have to live it if you want it to happen with the kids.

This teacher believes that one of the reasons Peacham has been able to develop such a strong sense of school culture is due to the school’s leadership. She explains:

I think it’s an administrator who is also a teacher, who is one of us. There’s not a hierarchy. Every once in a while, she has to make a decision, but… on a regular basis, it’s not… “the boss” type thing. The boss has definitely always been, from the time I’ve been here, shared decision-making, on everything. On just about everything…. I think that… it’s the type of leadership…. It’s the type of leader [the principal] is and it’s the type of leadership that she’s trying to nurture. She’s trying to and has made each of us a leader in our own way. She’s nurtured the strengths. She’s like… all I can think of is a mother eagle or someone who’s protective… who’s very protective, but then who’s also pushing you out of the nest because she wants you to soar.

A community member expresses similar thoughts:
[The principal is] an enabling person. She empowers not only the teachers but also the parents and the community to feel like they really make a difference. And I think that in large part that’s what it is. It’s her ability to really manage people well, and to [be] open-minded [about] people and when you have that feeling of empowerment, anything’s possible. She treats the teachers and the parents the way she treats the students and the way she would want everyone to treat each other….When I walk into the school and she comes up and says, “Oh, we’ve missed you, we missed your smile… and wouldn’t you love to help out in the library?” You just want to jump in and go with it. I think that’s the most important thing. You can have the structure, you can have the money to fund the curriculum and the textbooks and all that, and that’s all fine and well, but I know school systems that don’t have that sense of community and someone there to really pull it all together and make people feel like they make a difference, and it’s not going to be worth anything. You need to obviously have those tools to make a school happen, but the reason this place is special, I mean specifically, I really feel, is because of the leadership. Yeah – I think that’s it in a nutshell.

While teachers and community members often cite the principal’s leadership as an essential strength of Peacham School, many also believe that the shared vision and collaborative leadership among the faculty and staff are solid enough to sustain leadership change. One teacher reflects that the principal’s efforts to empower and individual and collective strengths of the teachers have resulted in an interdependency of the faculty and a firm and stable school culture that are strong enough to withstand personnel flux.

I think if [the principal] were to leave, and the core of us stayed the same, and we were allowed to work through looking for that leadership…. I think we could do it.

Peacham’s principal is also quick to affirm her belief that the school culture is strong enough at this point to sustain itself with changes in leadership.

It’s that that culture has to exist. Because it’s not the way it is because it’s the way I would want it to be. Actually, if you stood me apart and said, “Describe a perfect school,” it would probably not be like Peacham, because Peacham is the result of a lot of people’s input, and it’s not any one person’s vision or picture. There are multiple compromises made by many people to create… the way it works out. Often when you describe the kind of school you would imagine or want, it’s idealistic, and the reality is never going to be exactly that way. I think
there’s enough of a culture, in a way, that if I went,… things would change.… But… some of that culture would remain. That would be what would be lasting. You know, curriculum would change, people would change, and that kind of thing, but I hope that the things that would remain the same would be caring for kids as individuals, and listening to kids and including all kids…. I’m sure that would happen, because that’s what’s expected now. So I think that people would make sure that stayed in place – multiple people would make sure that would stay in place.

Twice a year, Peacham School opens its doors to students and their parents for a school-wide “Celebration of Learning.” On these special evenings, students share their cumulative portfolios with their parents, explaining their work, and helping their parents understand what they’ve learned throughout the year. Teachers are on hand to talk with students and parents about the child’s development and progress, and share in the celebration of the learning process. While in the teacher’s room during last spring’s “Celebration of Learning,” I overheard a teacher speak glowingly to her colleagues:

I was standing by the front door, and [a student] was walking in with his family. It was so cute, I have to tell [his teacher]. [His parents] said something to him, I couldn’t hear what, and he said, “I know that. This is MY school.” It was so cute. That’s what this evening is all about. There he was, in front, leading the way – This is MY school.

What is it then, that students actually learn at Peacham School? A group of teenagers who are Peacham alumni were recently asked to comment on their former school, and here are some of their responses:

Science program at Peacham was great.

Building the wigwams was good.

The Enrichment Program was great, I loved the person who came in to teach about the history of Peacham.

Teachers cared at Peacham – not just about your education, about about how [life] was going. That doesn’t happen at [my new school] – they care about your education, but not about how you’re feeling.
I liked how Peacham teachers taught us – now [at my new school] it’s boring.

These former students listed the advantages they had coming from Peacham to their new school as the following:
- Good math skills
- Working in groups
- Long-term planning
- Community projects
- Non-academic skills

The following suggestions were made when teenagers were asked what they would improve upon:
- Sex ed at Peacham could be better.
- There should be foreign language, part of the curriculum, and this should start early.

In terms of community-based learning, teachers often stress the child’s development of a “sense of place” as an important goal.

There’s a very important need for kids to realize that adults care about them. And, adults that aren’t your parents. And you can get that from a town, an active town like this…. They need to see that that’s an important thing when they’re little, because then it just becomes a natural thing. And in terms of this town, even though they may leave and move somewhere else, I think they definitely pick up that importance wherever they go… because we’re a mobile society…. I think… it really does give them a sense of place. Connections with other adults, I find, are just so incredibly valuable for all these kids.

One teacher used an example of a spontaneous project that developed in assemblies this year as an example of the learning process that happens at Peacham: the Buddy Program.

This project began as a new change during school assemblies in which all students sit in concentric circles and pair up with buddies – sixth graders with kindergarteners, fifth graders with first graders, and so on. The sixth graders and their kindergartner buddies began to get attached to one another during these meetings, and decided they wanted to spend more time together outside of assembly times. The sixth graders asked their teacher for additional time to meet with their new friends, but she replied that
unfortunately, there wasn’t enough time in the day with all they already needed to accomplish. Unsatisfied with this response, the sixth graders acted on their own initiative and lobbied to change their lunch schedule and recess times to coincide with the kindergarteners, so they could sit and play with their buddies.

Realizing how important these developing relationships were becoming to the students, the sixth grade and kindergarten teachers have tried to find ways to foster these connections. When sixth graders have free time, they often make their way into the kindergarten room, where they sit with their buddies, helping them with their reading, or working on classroom activities. Peacham’s kindergarten teacher explains:

> Each kindergartener has a sixth grade buddy. And that has been the one most favorite thing that has happened in all the years I’ve taught at Peacham. And I love to watch the sixth graders work with their buddies. I know we have done a good job when I watch them work with the kindergarteners. Because they’re doing everything I would hope to see from a child as they’re leaving sixth grade.

Asked what those behaviors are, the kindergarten teacher continues:

> They’re compassionate, they’re very caring – they’re very helpful in an instructional way, if they’re doing work. They help them to solve problems and learn how to solve problems with each other… through good word and vocabulary and through modeling – just all around, they’ll do everything like [they] should. And they’ll sit down and… they make time for their buddies. They never say, “I’m too busy, I’ve got to play soccer.” They make time, always, for them. And… nobody’s telling them to do it. They’ve done it on their own, and I think that’s very, very special.

Asked why she thinks the sixth graders enjoy this relationship, the teacher comments:

> I think they like being looked up to that way. One sixth grader came in and asked about his buddy and clearly was upset that his buddy wasn’t here today. You know, clearly was looking forward to seeing him. I think when they read to them, it’s a very comfortable, no-threat, sort of reading aloud kind of thing, and talking about a book, without it being their peers. And so, there’s no pressure. There’s not that stress involved with doing it – yet it’s wonderful practice for them and they do a wonderful job.
Speaking to her colleagues about the new vision statement process for Peacham School, this teacher hopes this current ethos of caring and community will be reflected in the new vision.

I know what I like about this [1989] vision statement. The buddy system, I see the sixth graders go through this school and receive and learn love and compassion, and they walk into my classroom and give every ounce right back.

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ii Ibid.
iii Ibid.