

MONTPELIER HIGH SCHOOL: RESTRUCTURING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Montpelier, Vermont

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May 1997

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Set in the small (population 8,000) beautiful capitol city of Vermont, Montpelier High School (MHS) epitomizes that which is positive about school reform. Innovative educational restructuring is happening throughout this high school—from reforms in pre-service education for future teachers and the implementation of a site-based management structure for current teachers to the development of personal growth opportunities for students. These initiatives reflect the school's commitment to its purpose, and consequently, to addressing both teacher and student needs.

Montpelier High School was originally selected as a case study site due to its established professional development school (PDS), done in collaboration with the University of Vermont (UVM). Through further research, it became apparent that the PDS was not the only innovative practice in place at MHS. For example, the site-based management model at MHS intentionally enables teachers to help with the organizational and decision-making activities related to the functioning of the school. In addition, student-centered reform initiatives that connect educational and real world experiences based on the students' areas of interest are underway. All of these activities exemplify the pervasiveness of educational reform at MHS.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SCHOOL

Over the past four years MHS and UVM have developed a collaborative partnership in the form of

a PDS. The Montpelier Professional Development Site, in conjunction with UVM, provides a unique experience for the secondary education students who intern at MHS. This program was designed to get pre-service educators (interns) actively engaged in the school:

The goal of the program is to provide participants direct experiences with a high degree of responsibility in the challenges and possibilities of working in today's educational and community-based organizations. . . Interns are seen as co-professionals in the school, who are able to teach and perform other adult roles in the life of the school: for example, as participants in planning, professional development, clubs, activities, and duties. Interns are involved with a variety of people in the school and thus are mentored and supported, as well as evaluated, through team efforts.¹

The pre-service educational team is made up of site coordinators, administrators, and faculty from the university and MHS. These professionals work together to create a productive experience for the student interns during their internship at MHS.

The model PDS structure involves a collaborative program between an elementary and/or secondary school and a post-secondary teacher education program. This collaboration is often expressed through reciprocal relationships. At the Montpelier site, for example, UVM faculty co-teach courses with MHS faculty at the high school. This provides accessibility for the interns and current MHS faculty who might

be interested in taking a college course. UVM also gives adjunct faculty appointments to cooperating teachers as a way of recognizing their invaluable contribution to the intern's experience. MHS faculty are entitled to a UVM identification card which, in turn, provides them with access to the library and other campus services. UVM and the faculty at MHS work together to observe interns as they teach and perform other related tasks. Each intern is subsequently evaluated by this collaborative educational team.

Interns appreciate and benefit from the professional way in which they are treated. When discussing his experience at MHS, one intern noted, "We're valued in the classroom; it is truly a cooperative experience. I have had a unique experience at MHS—they treat me as a co-professional." Two MHS interns summarized the general feeling about the program, saying that they feel "very fortunate" and "consider it, professionally, to be the best year of [their lives]." These interns are especially excited to be involved in a school that has been undergoing many changes:

I think there are a lot of opportunities and a lot going on in this school. The process of change has been ideal for an intern. There's so much going on— sometimes it's almost overwhelming! As far as the professional development opportunities go, it's definitely strong. Engaging in the PLP², for example, has been unique and valuable.

The Personal Learning Plan (PLP) is an area of reform for MHS that has given interns the opportunity to watch the school attempt to incorporate a very innovative student-centered initiative into the curriculum. One intern noted:

I think the PLP at MHS is something we studied 'ideally' in our education courses. It's something that every student would ideally be involved in, and they will. In education courses, you frequently realize that the ideal world doesn't always mesh with the practical world. Being involved with the PLP here, we'll be able to put it together— the

ideal and the real— and really have the students involved and active and be a voice in their education. This stuff we're getting 'on high' at UVM is really being put to use in the real world.

Other interns also describe the connection between theory and practice:

If you don't see it in the classroom, then it is just a theory— but when it (theory) is coming at you, you're like 'Whoa!' It's very powerful!

It's nice to be able to challenge our professors, too. When the faculty tells us about all of these nice ideas and theory you say, 'Yeah, that's nice, but last week when Joey and Susie were giving me a hard time, that didn't really work.' So you can probe beyond the band-aid approach to things.

The experience and knowledge that these interns bring to the classroom might be what deters some UVM education faculty from "buying into" the professional development school model. Because UVM students intern at a variety of different schools, the university faculty have different experiences at each of the cooperating sites, especially in regards to their level of responsibility. One UVM faculty member commented on this:

There is a range (of perceptions about this model) because we have been making this shift. It started out five years ago. Right now, site based observations are handled differently depending on where they (UVM interns) are. Some faculty are just appalled by it—they raise concerns about rigor and are threatened by the changes. . . The ideal is to have integrated teaching and learning for the interns—that's been a challenge for our UVM faculty. They are still stuck on lecturing. They say, 'But I have three hours of stuff to tell them each week.'

University faculty identify the changing role and time commitment needed as impediments to their support of a program like the one at MHS. They are being

asked to provide current information, potentially at a site other than a lecture hall. They aren't necessarily rewarded for this increased commitment. At the same time, other UVM faculty question whether or not this model is even enough to address the necessary reforms in teacher education.

The current structure of this PDS provides for both semester-long and full-year internships. Students are either completing their Bachelor's or Master's of Education degrees. A UVM faculty member noted, "The shift is certainly moving to the graduate level in teacher preparation. I personally don't think that one year is enough. . . . Even with our undergrads, two semesters is not enough. A five year program is ideal." During the 1996-97 school year, there were 11 interns; 8 of them interned for the whole year. There seems to be an advantage to interning for a school year because, as one intern commented, they are able to watch students "cycle through the year" and see the year "wrap-up."

UVM students intern in a variety of subject areas (e.g., English, history, geography, foreign languages, science, and math). There are a number of activities in which they are asked to participate. Their academic assignments include teaching three classes or two classes and an academic lab in their major. They also need to prepare for and teach a class outside their major. They are asked to become "immersed in the total life of the school" and "should use their time in the school to visit teachers and observe in classrooms both in and out of their academic discipline and at varying grade levels." Continuous professional development at MHS is also stressed to the interns. Their handbook states:

Traditional in-service days (dog and pony shows that are set up weeks in advance) are a thing of the past. Teachers shape the total development process and use each full or half day to address issues which they agree are in need of in-depth attention at that time. Teachers often organize and present parts or all of those days for each other, or

the school as a whole stops to take stock of how the school is doing (p. 9).

Interns are expected to be full contributors to this process.

All of these experiences help MHS interns build their "Internship Folio," which is useful for the Teacher Licensure Portfolio required by the state of Vermont. The following is a partial list of what the Internship Folio needs to include:

- Planning records, such as unit and lesson plans
- Actual lessons and units with evaluative and reflective comments
- Individual professional growth reflections, such as self-evaluations, journal entries, et cetera
- Observation reports.

The portfolio for licensure also asks for these types of documentation. Because interns are required to develop their own portfolio, they are ahead of their colleagues as they apply for licensure. A UVM faculty member describes this process as being "time and labor intensive," but very helpful for "building accountability and reliability." She also stresses the importance of learning how to do a portfolio. These interns are now able to apply this knowledge to helping students build their own portfolio—one similar to that used in the PLP. The portfolio guides the process for pre-service teachers to demonstrate their competencies.

The interns at MHS are challenged in this setting—they are being called on to act as a professional and participate in the total life of the school while reflecting on their own process as a teacher and a learner. As one UVM faculty member noted:

There is only so much an intern can take in at once. They are like the beginning teacher whose concern is survival in the classroom, as compared to an experienced teacher who can focus on a kid's

learning or an expert teacher who thinks even more broadly. We're asking them to do all of that!

From the comments of the interns, however, they feel that being pushed and challenged is exactly what they need.

MANAGEMENT TEAM

Another innovative educational reform implemented at MHS is site-based management. The high school operates under the guidance of a management team. This team is made up of eleven members of the high school faculty who have classroom teaching responsibilities in addition to their roles on the management team. According to one of the management team members, this form of governance “gives you ownership of the school on two different levels—operational and instructional.” Guided by a strong mission statement and a well-developed strategic plan, members of the management team

provide educational motivation and guidance to their colleagues.

Members of the management team are given additional monetary compensation for their efforts and have a reduced teaching load. The team is broken into four divisions (see Figure 1) with various emphases. Meetings of the divisions are used to address the operational aspects of the facility and the educational process. As one team member stated:

We have had heated discussions on certain topics but we have learned how to attack the problem and not the person. . .we have to check on this every now and then, to make sure everyone knows we are not upset with each other. When the management team has arrived at a consensus, we walk away with a third of the faculty in agreement on a particular theme.

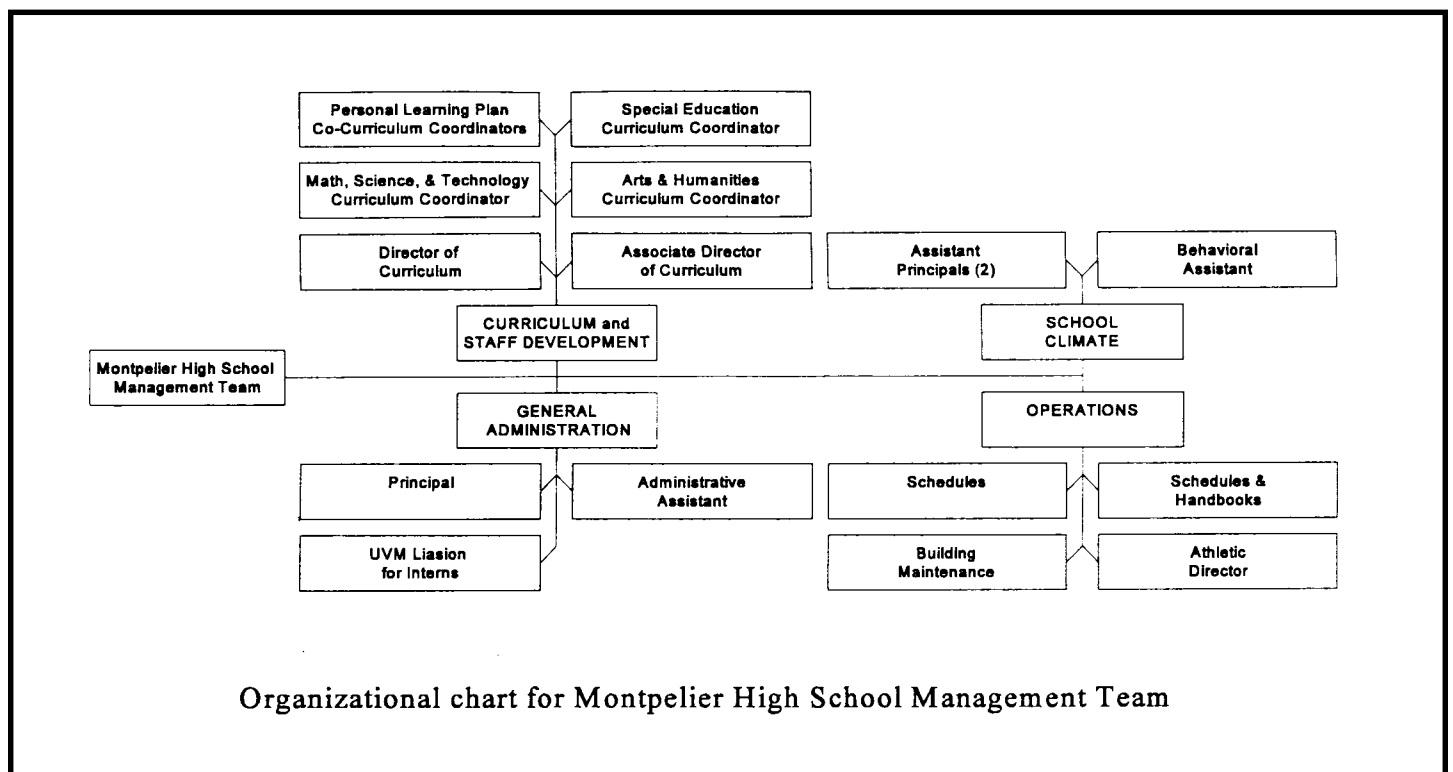


Figure 1.

One of the concerns expressed came from a team member who stated, “We are still struggling with how we assure that it (the current management system) perpetuates itself and how we foster leadership within this system.” In other words, some concern exists about how to get teachers who are not specifically a part of the management team involved in the life of the school .

The other concern expressed was related to the collective bargaining agreement between the district and the local teacher’s union; now in the third year of a five-year contract. The union has not been overtly supportive of the team management structure, but fortunately has offered only minimal resistance. When

negotiating the next agreement however, this issue is sure to be a source of contention. The feasibility of replicating this form of management structure at other buildings within the district will be based in part upon the continued success and acceptance of the program at MHS.

CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Restructuring the weekly schedule at MHS has provided many opportunities for organizational activities that support the professional growth of staff. To make professional growth and development a part of every teacher’s daily routine, the district and management team support and conduct weekly

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Period 1 <i>Enrichment</i> 7:45-8:40	Period 1 <i>Enrichment</i> 7:45-8:40	Faculty Inservice 7:30-9:00	Period 1 <i>Enrichment</i> 7:45-8:40	Period 1 <i>Enrichment</i> 7:45-8:40
Period 2 8:45-9:29	Period 2 8:45-10:05	Period 3 9:00-10:20	Period 2 8:45-9:29	Period 2 8:45-9:29
Period 3 9:32-10:16			Period 3 9:32-10:16	Period 3 9:32-10:16
Period 4 10:19-11:03	Period 4 10:08-11:28	Period 5 10:23-11:43	Period 4 10:19-11:03	Period 4 10:19-11:03
Period 5 11:06-11:50			Period 5 11:06-11:50	Period 5 11:06-11:50
Lunch A 11:50-12:22 Period 6A 12:25-1:09	Lunch A 11:28-11:58 Period 6A 12:00-1:20	Lunch A 11:43-12:13 Period 7A 12:16-1:36	Lunch A 11:50-12:22 Period 6A 12:25-1:09	Lunch A 11:50-12:22 Period 6A 12:25-1:09
Period 6B 11:53-12:37 Lunch B 12:37-1:09	Period 6B 11:31-12:51 Lunch B 12:51-1:20	Period 7B 11:46-1:06 Lunch B 1:06-1:36	Period 6B 11:53-12:37 Lunch B 12:37-1:09	Period 6B 11:53-12:37 Lunch B 12:37-1:09
Advisor Period 1:11-1:16	Advisor Period 1:22-1:27	Advisor Period 1:40-2:00	Advisor Period 1:11-1:16	Advisor Period 1:11-1:16
Period 7 1:19-2:03	Period 8 1:30-2:50	Student Support 2:00-2:50	Period 7 1:19-2:03	Period 7 1:19-2:03
Period 8 2:06-2:50			Period 8 2:06-2:50	Period 8 2:06-2:50

Figure 2: Modified long-block schedule utilized by Montpelier High School

activities. One of these activities is a regularly scheduled Monday afternoon faculty meeting that is not a typical faculty meeting. The dissemination of information and other routine procedures are carried out by members of the management team throughout the week so more important inservice opportunities are able to take place at the faculty meeting.

By using a modified long block schedule (see Figure 2), educators also have professional development opportunities on Wednesday mornings, while students have a late start. Inadvertently, the modified long block schedule provided increased student/teacher contact time; therefore the implementation of the Wednesday morning faculty inservice met with little opposition from stakeholders. Wednesday morning faculty inservices focus on topics ranging from instructional pedagogy to student services. This format has allowed educators to obtain further training and update knowledge and skills that directly affect student performance in the classroom. By using current MHS educators to provide inservice training, the high school has promoted the development of a professional learning community. This weekly format of inservicing provides educators with an opportunity to implement, practice, and reflect on their training experience. Follow-up activities the next week may include further training or discussion of difficulties and concerns experienced during the week.

The organizational periods in the restructured schedule allow educators flexibility in their planning and professional growth. Period 1 is scheduled as an enrichment period, offering only four different courses and involving four teachers. On Mondays during this time, the remainder of the faculty meet as Educational Support Teams (EST) to discuss difficulties with teaching and student progress. Throughout the rest of the week, teachers utilize this time for collaborative or individual planning. In addition, the schedule provides teachers with a personal planning period.

STUDENT INITIATIVES

As mentioned previously, the schedule at MHS provides a great deal of flexibility and sufficient time to disseminate information and work collaboratively with other educators. UVM interns are active participants in all of this. Fortunately for students, these structures allow the implementation of two important initiatives for their own growth: the development of Personal Learning Plans and Community-Based Learning opportunities.

PERSONAL LEARNING PLANS

Educators and administrators at MHS have recognized the need for students to think about and address their own goals during their high school experience. The development of Personal Learning Plans (PLP) is one way in which educators are helping students connect their experiences in school to their future life and career goals. The PLP mission statement describes this intentional effort:

We believe that a Personal Learning Plan is a student centered process with programs that support students in identifying and developing their strengths, needs, and interests so they become engaged in their educational experience.

Educators at MHS called Teacher Advisors work individually with students to help them assess themselves and set personal and educational goals. Students then identify and list what resources they need to reach these goals while staff at MHS works with students and their parents/guardians to accomplish these goals.

The Teacher Advisor (TA) model has already been established at MHS with about half of the staff meeting with students individually throughout the school year. The organizational structure and schedule enables TAs to meet with students during Teacher Advisor blocks (see Figure 1). When the PLP model is fully implemented in the school, TAs, students, and parents/guardians will meet at the start of the school year, midway through, and at the end of the year. These

meetings will take place during in-service days and will ideally be facilitated and led by students. The TAs and their students meet every Wednesday throughout the school year. Once a month, the students and the TA will meet for both the TA period and the Student Support time block.

A current MHS senior noted the impact that PLPs will have on students:

It will be a good way for individual students to further their education on what they really want to do. It will make their education more meaningful to them. There are a ton of students, myself included, who just don't like coming here because we're not doing the stuff we want to be doing. But this will be a good way to incorporate things like community projects into school. You might be able to get out of school for a little while, take a break, but you're still learning. It's definitely going to impact you more out of high school than sitting in a classroom doing something that 20 other students are doing.

PLPs address different learning styles and needs for students. Students can incorporate activities they might already be doing (e.g.: a community based learning project or athletics) into their current educational plans and goals. If other interests are not being addressed through traditional classes or modes of learning, the PLP offers flexibility for students to create the learning experiences they need.

Concerns have been expressed by those who fear the extra work and individualized attention the PLP requires. An administrator noted:

This requires a conceptual change about personal learning. There is some fear, I think, that this can be done. It threatens the teacher to think, 'Well, what if everybody needs something different. If everybody's individually learning, what am I going to do? I teach 20 kids and that's my conception of learning.' We're asking them to think broader than that.

Fortunately two of the key pieces of the PLP—the TA period and the community based learning program—are already in place. However, as a current teacher notes, “there is still some confusion about what the PLP means and how it’s going to work.” During the first year of implementation (1997-98), the MHS staff will be watching intently to see if this model adheres to its guiding principles. A Personal Learning Plan will:

- Include all students
- Be student centered
- Be a partnership between students parents, school, and community
- Recognize and value each student as an individual
- Encourage personal excellence
- Be flexible
- Utilize a variety of resources
- Connect student learning
- Assess and evaluate the goals and objectives of an effective PLP.

COMMUNITY BASED LEARNING

The Community Based Learning Program (CBL) is a learning-by-doing experience for students that uses the community as an extension of the classroom. This student-centered endeavor is a partnership between the community, school, student, and parents. In voicing support for the CBL experience, an educator shared the following:

I became interested in CBL because it offered some of the things that I felt were missing when I was teaching . . . that was the opportunity for these young people to make a connection with the community . . . For the first time, I was beginning to see something happening in education that would give students an idea of what education is all about, some connection to their learning, some

experience in the community . . . It was a beginning of tying everything one does in the classroom together.

Excited and enthusiastic students commented on the impact this experience has had on them:

It gives me the confidence . . . confidence to go out into the community and say 'I can do this.'

Your education is part of your future . . . these experiences are all like building blocks to what's going to happen in the future . . . It connects me as a person to my own development and to my future. That's the connection that is important.

Students develop a learning plan in cooperation with the community site supervisor that outlines the expectations and activities of the participant. At least fifteen hours of service occurs during school, after school, and on weekends—typically for 1–5 hours a week. Students participating in this program may elect academic credit or service recognition points through the “Silver M” program. The Silver M is given to seniors for accumulating service points within the school and community. Students are encouraged to reflect upon their experiences through journal writing and projects. The culminating event in the CBL program is an opportunity for participants to share their acquired knowledge and skills with faculty and staff. The CBL and PLP complement the high school's future vision of having all students participate in a senior project and exposition as part of the graduation process.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Administrators and educators hope to continue to use the PLP approach as a restructuring movement in the school system. At the same time, they will continue to involve student interns in all of the day-to-day activities and evolution the school will experience. Taken as a whole, the Montpelier professional development site provides significant contributions to the connection of students and educators with the world of work, both inside the school building and out.

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ENDNOTES

- [1] *Handbook for Interns in the Secondary Education Licensure Program of the Montpelier K-16 Partnership for Life-long Learning.* (1996-97) The College of Education and Social Services of the University of Vermont and Montpelier High School, .
- [2] Personal Learning Plan (PLP)— “A student centered process with programs that support students in identifying and developing their strengths, needs, and interests so they become engaged in their educational experience.”
- [3] *Staff Manual for Personal Learning Plans at Montpelier High School* (1997- 98). Draft Proposal. Montpelier, VT: Personal Learning Plan Team.