



REACHING

When Sonoma Academy moved to a new campus on the edge of this once-bucolic Northern California town, school leaders saw an opportunity to reinterpret the school's community outreach program, created eight years ago with the school's founding.

"We very intentionally addressed the impact of our move on our school community and the local community, in every way we could think of," says Head of School Janet Durgin. "Before we had a single back-to-school meeting with faculty, we loaded everyone into vans to tour the neighborhood, to see who our neighbors were. And I got the question 'Why?' and my answer was, 'Because

this sense of community has to come before everything else.'"

Today, faculty and students at Sonoma Academy participate in learning exchanges with nearby public elementary schools, cultivate an organic garden with local residents, and work alongside paid staff and volunteers at numerous community-based organizations.

Sonoma Academy students are encouraged to do more than drop in on community nonprofits or neighborhood schools. This year, the school offers students an elective class that requires them to spend several hours a week walking around town, exploring different neighborhoods. The



OUT

Independent schools redefine civic engagement

By JODY BECKER

aim is to heighten the students' awareness both of the people who are their neighbors and of the rhythm of daily life in the neighborhood, which was there long before the school broke ground.

Last fall, the school invited local residents to a stakeholder's meeting to discuss their thoughts and concerns about a school having been built on beloved open lands in the community. "One of our students asked, 'What has it been like?'" says Durgin. "And she got a real answer: 'It's been hard, but we'd rather have your school here than a big housing development.'"

"We heard that," says Durgin. "That's a part of being in this community."

VALUE ADDED

Sonoma Academy's 21st-century approach to community engagement builds upon the historic mandate of independent schools, which have assisted their surrounding communities for centuries. Over the years, programs for the poor and scholarship programs aimed at promising students of color have evolved into community service and, more recently "service learning" programs that integrate community service projects into the school curriculum.

"The purpose of independent schools, from the very beginning, over 300 years ago, was to take young students and prepare them academically,

spiritually, and constitutionally to serve the community,” says Patrick F. Bassett, president of the National Association of Independent Schools. “So the ‘public purpose of private education’ has a long and consistent history in the missions of independent schools.” In

with each other after many visits back and forth,” says Ballengee.

Penn also encourages its students to look for potential partnership opportunities in the community. “We have projects that are ongoing, but we also take cues from the community, and our students,” says Ballengee.



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UPDATING HISTORY

Like Ballengee, many private school leaders see a relevance and urgency in explicitly articulating the value of connections between their schools and the public schools in the communities that surround them.

the United States today, independent schools educate just 1 percent of the K-12 population, but the goal for many school leaders is to engage the entire community, both near and far from the schoolhouse doors.

ON A MISSION

At Philadelphia’s William Penn Charter School, the oldest Quaker school in the world, guiding engaged citizenship has been embedded in the curriculum from its beginning.

Jim Ballengee, the school’s director of service learning, says Penn’s mission-driven public purpose initiatives have changed gradually over the years, from service to service learning to a new model that fully embraces a partnership with the community. “We see in all of the programs that the learning goes both ways,” says Ballengee. One longstanding partnership pairs Penn students with students who are physically challenged or medically fragile at Widener Memorial School, a special education center that is part of the Philadelphia public school system. As part of the program, students participate in various activities, including ballroom dancing in mixed pairs of students with and without wheelchairs. They also read articles and books about disability and mainstreaming. “What they all discover is a comfort level

A growing number of schools are making those connections by working with Wingspan Partnerships, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping private schools rethink their community-engagement practices. The organization, which was founded two years ago, works with independent schools and their communities by auditing the public purpose programs already in place and recommending new strategies that will affect the larger area.

“Virtually every school has a commitment to engaging with the broader community,” says Jacqueline Smethurst, co-founder of Wingspan. “Our goal is to help schools integrate public purpose as an orientation, not just a program.”

An increasing number of schools, including William Penn Charter, Garrison Forest in Maryland, Sidwell Friends in Washington, D.C., and Lick-Wilmerding High School in San Francisco, are working with Wingspan to define their future vision for community engagement. These schools are currently supporting multiple projects and partnering with needy public schools in their communities.

For example, at Sage Hill School in Newport Beach, Calif., the Wingspan team worked with trustees, faculty, and administrators to complete a public purpose audit, reviewing existing programs, resources,

and opportunities. The result: partnerships with three neighboring elementary schools—El Sol Charter Academy in Santa Ana, and Wilson Elementary School and Killybrooke Elementary School in Costa Mesa. The new community programs focus on what Sage Hill knows best: education, teaching hundreds of young English-language learners and its own students in new and exciting ways.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Smethurst says the economic downturn has presented a unique opportunity for creating what she calls “authentic partnerships.” “We’ve all been hit by this [downturn],” Smethurst says, “and what is truly moving and uplifting is how deeply people believe that when times are tough, we need to share resources. It’s really been a wake-up call to think more deeply about our schools’ role in society and the broader community.”

A veteran independent school educator and consultant, Smethurst and her partner, independent school leader David Drinkwater, founded Wingspan after being forced out of their New Orleans home by Hurricane Katrina. The pair decided to confront the chronic inequities of race and class that were brutally exposed by the disaster by turning an idea and an inclination into an organization with a mission.

“Our initial intention was to build several strong partnership models involving a small group of schools on each coast,” says Smethurst. “But as we launched the process of research, incorporation, and financing, we were astonished at the outpouring of interest from individual schools and groups of schools seeking to strengthen their impact through collaborative efforts.”

The Wingspan model focuses on sharing resources and insights between independent and public schools. Although the organization offers guidelines and suggests starting points for successful school-to-school relationships, it does not prescribe what those partnerships should look like. “What is critical is the genuine relationships between people,” says Smethurst. “Nothing matters like teachers, principals, and even

parents asking one another, ‘What can I do?’ and in every community, the answers are very specific.”


OPEN TO INTERPRETATION

For students at Garrison Forest School, the focus is taking community outreach from service to engagement. “We wanted to broaden the way our students are addressing social issues and social problems with social entrepreneurship,” says Head of School Peter O’Neill. “Part of that is understanding how our community functions, the power of NGOs and not-for-profits—a kind of civic literacy that transcends the traditional service.”

Students and teachers at Garrison Forest can find community opportunities and engage with peers through the school’s new James Center for Public Purpose, designed to prepare students to be better citizens. The program matches students with a broad range of service learning opportunities that emphasize community, leadership, and financial literacy. “What we are doing is creating pathways for leadership,” says O’Neill.

MAP TO THE FUTURE

Economically lean times can prompt a school to redefine its community service program. It may decide to refocus student and faculty engagement on fewer projects, or concentrate on projects with the most impact.

“Sometimes schools are surprised to see that resources on hand can support meaningful public-private school partnerships at little or no expense at all,” says Wingspan’s Smethurst. “That’s the future: what works, for everyone, without adding cost. We are constantly delighted to find that inspired ideas flow in these relationships, and that is absolutely free.” 

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