Close to Home

Rooting Learning in Community

by Joel Tolman

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In rural communities around the United States, a familiar (almost cliché) story plays out: Shifting economic and demographic winds spell an end to the sources of prosperity that once supported these small towns. Young people without much cause for hope either drop out into low-paying service sector jobs or get out to find their place in the new suburban and urban economy.

High school students in Lubec, Maine, have put a twist on this plot: They are claiming the vanishing way of life, and their town’s destiny, as their own. They have made it their responsibility — and that of their school — to try to revive the declining economy and move the community’s primary industry to a more sustainable path. And, against tough odds, they are succeeding...

Students, teachers and community volunteers have turned an abandoned water treatment facility 50 feet from the school into a state-of-the-art aquaculture center. Here students raise trout and salmon for marketing in the newly purified water, beefed up with their own brew of nutrients. Recently they added a hydroponics greenhouse that uses captured water from the aquaculture center. The research conducted by students is similarly impressive, resulting in real impact on economics inside and outside the community... (Tolman & Pittman with Cervone et al., 2001).

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The Notting Dale Urban Studies Centre, located in a multicultural area of West London, serves as a base for local children and youth, as well as adults, to investigate and discuss the changes taking place in communities surrounding the Centre ... Groups of children from surrounding schools use the Centre as a base to conduct investigations about the local environment... The children go out with tape recorders, cameras, and pencil and paper to document existing conditions. They might interview residents, local officials or people who work in the neighborhood. On their return to the Centre, they transcribe recordings, print photographs and type reports. Materials assembled by previous groups of children are retrieved from files for reference and comparison. Working together in small groups, the children sift through, discuss and interpret their material, and put it in the form of a newspaper to take back for printing and circulation around their school.

Over the course of time, much material has been collected by groups working at the Centre ... The Centre houses a vast array of archives — statistics, minutes, briefs, case studies, correspondence, newspapers and the students’ own documentations — that describe life on the public housing estates in the area, and ideas about environmental changes, why they were happening, and how they could be improved (Hart, 1997).

* * * *

My school is called School Without Walls. A big part of our school’s philosophy is that we use the community as a classroom, which means we have a partnership with George Washington University. At our school, we have maybe 20 classrooms. We have no auditorium. We have no gym. We have no lockers. We have no playing field. We have none of that. We use all of GW’s, and it makes our students much more resourceful in the way that they go about things. We use a lot of museums. We use GW’s facilities. I think it makes people in our school a lot more independent and focused.

And, with a block schedule, we have more time to go to museums, to sit down and listen to all the audio-visuals inside the museums. I think the reason why I like the schedule is because our school is humanities-based. We always have a connection back to reality, back to life, back to the other disciplines inside the school. That makes a big difference. If you don’t have something tying it all together, it just seems like you’re going to eight different teachers, learning eight different lessons (Delonte Briggs, School Without Walls Senior, in Tolman, ed., 2000).
These three scenes — snapshots of students’ experiences in different settings, employing different strategies to teach different content — are pictures of real learning. Students are motivated and active. They and their teachers are engaged in challenging work that supports both deep understanding of content and the development of powerful, transferable skills for thinking and doing. Their efforts yield real results — products in which they and their communities can take pride, real contributions to the well-being of themselves and others, credible research that advances understanding in their fields. And, in the process, students are putting down deep roots, building commitments to their hometowns and issues that affect every community on the planet.

What makes these images — real-world experiences, not pipe dreams or utopian visions — possible? The common core of these learning experiences is that they are rooted in community. All aspects of the learning experience are integrated into the places that surround the school. While the knowledge and skills that students learn are valuable anywhere, they are grounded in local realities. The teaching practices employed — focusing on active engagement, high expectations and relevance — are equally universal. But it is the fact that teaching is rooted in community that makes such effective pedagogy possible. The learning environment – the context in which these good teaching practices are embedded – is equally enriched and enlivened, as the boundaries between the school building and the community are blurred to the point that they are almost non-existent.

Contrast these scenes, these principles, with those that greet many high school students every weekday at 8:30 A.M. Content that often seems distant from their current lives and irrelevant to their hopes for the future. Learning experiences in which they are the passive recipients of knowledge, fostering alienation more than engagement. Schools that stand apart from their communities — whether with physical distance, locked doors and metal detectors, restrictive policies, or unfriendly teachers and administrators. These are the features of too many of the country’s public high schools — schools anything but rooted in community.

“We boast of our system of education, but why stop at schoolmasters and schoolhouses? We are all schoolmasters and our schoolhouse is the universe. To attend chiefly to the desks or schoolhouse, while we neglect the scenery in which it is placed, is absurd.”
— Thoreau in Williams, 1998

The community-centered school accepts responsibility for the social well-being of the community…. The community-centered school can function successfully only if it be willing to become the friend and neighbor, as well as the educational leader of the community.

— Covello in Perrone, 1998
On Common Ground

What will it take to root learning in community? The obstacles are daunting. But from every compass point, advocates and educators are converging on a common agenda: making learning local.¹

- **Environmental educators** recognize that experiences in natural places close to home plant deep seeds of commitment and understanding. For example, the State Education and Environment Roundtable has pioneered an approach it calls Environment as the Integrating Context for Learning — and demonstrated the sizeable educational impacts of using the local environment to organize and connect learning experiences (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998).

- **Rural and urban educators** alike are eager to link students to their home communities and, in the process, provide rich learning experiences. The Rural School and Community Trust, for instance, has done as much as any organization to forward the agenda of community-rooted learning — providing resources and support to hundreds of rural schools as they engage their students in place-based education.

- **Teachers in a range of disciplines** understand that students long for something relevant, tangible and close to home as they try to make sense of often abstract course content. Historians, for instance, have come to realize that close study of historic sites provides students with a tangible link to the past. Writing in a journal of the Organization of American Historians, high school history teacher James Percoco (2002) describes the potential of “public history” — historical work done through “some kind of public venue, be it a historic site, a museum, a television documentary or a Hollywood film” — in the curriculum, a sentiment echoed by educators from the National Register of Historic Places and a range of other efforts.

- **Educators committed to active and project-based learning** and **community development organizations** come together around the idea of young people and schools as engines of community revitalization. The school reform model that has grown out of Outward Bound’s outdoor challenge programs, for instance, is built around long-term “learning expeditions” — projects through which students tackle community problems, do serious research and meet academic standards.

- **School-to-work advocates** and workforce development practitioners reap impressive educational rewards when they integrate in-school learning and lessons in local businesses. Adria Steinberg’s call in her book, *Real Learning, Real Work* (1998), that schools “ground projects in community life” echoes the assertion of many young people: that internships, work-based learning and community projects are the best preparation for life after high school.

- **Educational facilities designers** recognize that the places they create can be integral to the curriculum, rather than just the locations where learning happens — and occasionally invite students into the design process itself.

- **Geographers and geography educators** bring long traditions of local fieldwork, regional studies and interest in how students perceive the places they experience.

¹ The organizations, individuals, and efforts included here — and cited throughout this paper — are only exemplary of participants in the broader movement for community-rooted learning. The volume of this work, and its many sources, make it impossible to describe or even mention all of the relevant efforts.
- Developmental and environmental psychologists continue to uncover a deep connection between physical location and the learning process — building on the work of pioneers like Urie Bronfenbrenner, whose ecological approach to human development brought new appreciation of how context affects young people.

- Advocates for school-community connections see opportunities to root curriculum in neighborhoods as a natural part of their broader agenda. For example, the Coalition of Community Schools — an organization committed to linking schools and their communities — recently brought together advocates from worlds as diverse as service-learning, school-to-work, environmental education and rural education, all convinced that community is the text for learning.

In short, many roads lead to place-based learning. The motivations, assumptions and practices rooted in these perspectives are different. But practitioners and advocates of these divergent strategies are moving toward a common destination, a powerful way to support learning. It is time to look more closely at this common ground.
What Are We Talking About?

Looking back at the snapshots that began this paper, it is possible to identify some defining features of learning experiences that are rooted in community. In short, every aspect of the learning process is rooted in things close to home — the people, places and possibilities that exist in the communities surrounding the school. In particular, three central aspects of the learning process are grounded in community: The content of learning, while focusing on skills and knowledge of relevance wherever a young person lives, has a “local flavor.” The process and pedagogy of learning are local. And the local context of learning is put front and center.

The Community Is the Textbook

In learning that is rooted in community, the substance of education — the content with which students grapple — hits close to home. Community-rooted learning is based on the premise that the local community and environment are worth knowing, in the same way that mathematics and the structures of the nation’s government are worth knowing. This statement may conjure up images of local history courses in high school, where students memorize the counties in their state and its primary industries, read a book written by a local author and move on. Knowledge of local politics, economics, geography, culture, ecology and literature — these are indeed one part of the content of community-rooted learning. Students should leave their high school experience with an understanding of how decisions are made in their community, what forces shaped the local environment, how artists have responded to this landscape. Coming to appreciate this “local cannon” is certainly part of using the community as a textbook.

But unlike the usual experience of state and local history, the learning of local knowledge in community-rooted learning is more than an end in itself. Instead, it is a point of entry into the skills, knowledge and understanding that we hope young people will come to have and hold. A young person learns first hand (through interviews, field trips, investigations, participation, perhaps even trying to create change) how decisions are made in his school, and then in his city, before tackling the larger, more distant and more abstract forms of national government. Another student is able to grasp more than 10,000 years of history — the impact of the last ice age, the slow soil-building of the forested landscape, and the impact of generations of human settlement — by studying how it has played out an acre. Students investigating how the local newspaper covers youth learn lasting skills as researchers, interviewers, public speakers and dogged learners. In the process of experiences like these, the community becomes a textbook in a second, important sense — it is the vehicle for communicating the larger lessons we hope young people will learn.

The process by which the local community is “read” is richer, more difficult and more complicated than what students are used to when they open their history texts. The community is no open book, requiring close skills of observation, patience and an understanding of other places (again, the sort of skills and content we hope students will have when they complete school). In the words of Tom Wessels, author of *Reading the Forested Landscape*, “the analogy to a history book is very appropriate, but reading the landscape is also like reading a mystery, since it involves sleuthing.” But the tradition of using community as text is not a new one; educators and explorers have already walked this route, leaving marks behind that allow others to follow their lead. As Wessels points out, Thoreau was a landscape-reader, and books like *Reading the Landscape* by May Watts (1964) offer a clear roadmap for teachers.
“looking for an alternative to the dry and deadened texts they currently force upon their students.” The ranks of salesmen and women for this new kind of textbook are growing, as well.2

The Community Is the Teacher

Looking back at Delonte’s experience at School Without Walls, one has to notice the number and diversity of “teachers” who he must encounter during his school week. Besides his classroom teachers, Delonte likely learns from the youth worker at the YMCA, a professor at the university with which the school partners, a parent of one of his classmates invited in to his math class to talk about engineering, a fellow student presenting his senior project, the educator at the National Zoo where his biology class regularly meets, and a half-dozen others. For Delonte, the community is the teacher in the most concrete sense; more adults and peers have brought their knowledge and teaching skills into his daily life.

Whether or not more adults make their ways into the classroom, community-rooted learning consistently involves the community as a co-teacher, complementing and supporting the efforts of the “real” teacher in students’ lives. What exactly does this mean? In a community-rooted school, active engagement with the community and the environment is the vehicle for learning, whatever the content being taught. Students learn through projects and investigations in which they dive deep into the community, making meaningful connections to their world, and presenting their findings and projects to a variety of real audiences.

Why Do It?

Not all the research is in. But the available evidence and experience indicates the potential and real impacts of community-rooted learning.

Local Learning is Effective Learning. The bottom line: If community-rooted learning does not make for more effective education, it will not — and should not — become a central component of public schooling. But the case for place-based learning is strong. At the heart of place-based learning are the building blocks of student motivation — relevance, choice, control, a stimulating environment, authentic feedback, discovery — identified by decades of research (e.g., Deci and Ryan, 1991; Adelman, 1978; Patrick et al., 2000). It embodies critical features of effective learning environments — features like challenge and high expectations, opportunities for contribution, expanding connections and networks — again based in research on families, schools and organizations (Learning First Alliance, 2001; Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 2000; National Research Council, 2002). It is aligned with our understanding of learning theory and cognitive development, which emphasizes that learning happens through active engagement, is social in nature and is context-specific (Driscoll, 2000). It focuses squarely on “competencies that count” (Steinberg, 2001) — solving “messy” problems, thinking critically and analytically, effective social interaction and cooperation, and creating high-quality performances and products — identified by SCANS and others as the necessary skills for success in work and life. And, most importantly, it delivers on its promise to improve educational achievement and student learning (Expeditionary Learning, 2001; Lieberman & Hoody, 1998; Scales et al., 2000).

The Bigger Picture: Outcomes for Community and Society. For educators, making learning local is primarily a means to achieve their bottom line: more effective teaching leading to better, deeper and more useful learning. But communities and society as a whole can and should be asking larger questions as they evaluate the success of schools. Are communities stronger, healthier and more sustainable as a result of what goes on in schools? Is the economy in better shape, and will it stay that way? Is the environment more capable of sustaining humans and other forms of life? Is our democracy more vibrant, and our nation a more just and caring place? The answer: Yes. Through place-based education efforts, young people are making sturdy contributions to their communities — as at the Food Project in Boston, where young people last year grew 73,000 pounds of fresh produce for their neighborhoods, or in Lubec, Maine, where students’ research, advocacy and hard work has resulted in a state-of-the-art aquaculture center, now attracting public and private investors in the local economy, and several new small businesses. Schools achieve their potential as community centers and resources. At the same time, local learning experiences can also result in a lasting commitment to community and environment. Taking a close look at several longitudinal studies, Youniss and his colleagues (1997) found that young people who belong to local clubs and civic organizations, and who participate in political activities close to home, grow up many times more likely to vote, and to stay involved in political and civic life, for decades longer. Community-rooted learning, then, is a sure route to engaged communities and healthier environments in the out years, as well as in the short term.

2 The notion of “community as text” has found strong advocates within the Coalition for Community Schools, particularly Ira Harkavey of the University of Pennsylvania and Marty Blank, director of the Coalition (e.g., Blank, Johnson and Shah, 2002).
into real community issues. In the process, they are coached and instructed by the immediate and direct feedback the place provides — the garden they have planted thrives or struggles, they make headway in their effort to stop marketing of cigarettes to minors, they get good results from research on a species of fish.

Though the community may become a co-teacher in place-based learning, the role of the “real” teacher is in no way diminished. A teacher’s work as coach, instructor, facilitator of reflection and source of knowledge remains critical. But community comes to be the teacher’s partner in all she or he does.

**The Community Is the Classroom**

During a site visit to the Mountain School — a semester-long program for high school juniors in rural Vermont — a history teacher tells me of the transformation that took place in his students when he held his class in a boat. For weeks, Andy tells me, the students had been poor listeners, ignoring each other’s comments during class, showing little respect for their peers. Sitting together in a rowboat, the dozen students were shaken out of their usual roles. They listened. They built on each others’ comments — a hallmark of the Mountain School. And they loved it. In subsequent classes, students returned to their classroom — but not to the habits that had kept them from learning.

Though many would laud this story as exemplary community-rooted learning — and the teacher’s creativity is laudable — Andy is dissatisfied. For him, stepping outside the classroom door is only the first step in rooting learning in community. For one thing, the role of place in education should be more lasting and consistent than this, resulting in a permanent blurring of the boundaries between school and community. Community should always — or at least often — be the classroom, not just when the students need a change of pace. This can happen as it does at School Without Walls — where classes are held in a range of community institutions that already have learning as their goal. A small cadre of educational facilities designers are taking this model seriously, advocating that schools be housed in a range of existing buildings throughout town (Sobel, 2002). Alternatively, the community can become a lasting classroom as it has at Lubec High School, where students engage in ongoing investigations of the local environment, reclaim decaying community infrastructure as potential learning environments, and spend time interviewing residents downtown.

Further, making the community the classroom is not just about where learning happens. It also involves careful attention to how that location is a critical part of the learning equation. In most classrooms, the environment offers both stimulus for learning — students’ work on the walls is a source of motivation, compelling images related to the subject matter draw students in — and the material for learning — books, maps, displays, the equipment of experimentation. When the broader community is the classroom, it is also the source of stimulus and the material of learning, but in a way many times richer and more robust. In the Mountain School example, the environment was leveraged as a source of stimulus and focus. But perhaps Andy was dissatisfied because the community did not become the material for the learning — just its setting. At its most vigorous, community-rooted learning uses the community to its full capacity as a classroom.

Education that is close to home in all three of these senses is community-rooted learning at its best. With these as common starting points, it’s possible to get to the heart of the matter: how community-rooted learning happens.
How Do We Do It?

The three snapshots that begin this article — of Lubec High School, the Notting Dale Urban Studies Centre and School Without Walls — are not the same story. The roles that students take on vary across these three places. In Lubec, students are entrepreneurs and applied scientists; at the Centre, they are documentarians and social scientists; at School Without Walls, they are self-directed learners and citizens of their urban community. The stories are different, as well, in the sort of teaching they involve. The focus at School Without Walls is on interdisciplinary integration of content and on brokering learning relationships with a range of community institutions. In Lubec, teachers are there to frame the challenge and weave content through students’ learning experience. In Roger Hart’s description of the Notting Dale, the role of teachers is as facilitators of student investigations, stepping in largely when students ask for help.

As these stories indicate, the practice of community-rooted learning is varied — adapted to individual places, influenced by different approaches to teaching and learning, grounded in different disciplines and perspectives. But despite their differences, these stories form part of a single narrative, joined by common principles, starting points and concrete actions. They involve similar shifts in the relationships between students and teachers. And they tend to reflect similar assumptions about how learning happens. They are not part of a monolithic method — but they are part of an emerging field and approach to teaching.

Deep Roots, Common Principles

Consider the roots of place-based education, the approaches and traditions from which it grows. Among the most critical, familiar and well-developed: service-learning, school-to-work, environmental education, outdoor education and the documentary-based work pioneered by Foxfire. These approaches to community-rooted learning reflect genuine currents within practice, different ways of doing place-based teaching. But look at the defining features of these approaches side by side, and you uncover a clear picture of the principles of practice most critical to community-rooted learning — the common core of place-based practice.

Advocates and practitioners of these approaches have worked hard to define what makes for their distinctive and effective ways of supporting learning — their principles of practice. A simple exercise — putting these lists of principles next to each other — indicates that there is a good amount of consensus about how to do place-based education (see Table 1: Community-Rooted Learning: Common Principles of Practice, page 10).³

³ In order to make lists of principles comparable, and to fit the constraints of a side-by-side chart, the original language used by each source has been shortened, excerpted and paraphrased in Table 1.
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<td>Active learning</td>
<td>Environment, local natural and community surroundings, as the venue for connecting</td>
<td>Connections between classroom work, the surrounding communities and the world beyond community</td>
<td>Experiences in the natural world</td>
<td>Adult relationships /active exploration (field-based work)</td>
<td>Extends learning beyond the classroom and into the community</td>
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<td>Applied, problem-based and relevant</td>
<td>Problem and issue-based learning experiences</td>
<td>Peer teaching, small group work and teamwork</td>
<td>Intimacy and caring, collaboration and competition</td>
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<td>Collaborative, caring learning community</td>
<td>School-community collaboration</td>
<td>Combination of independent and collaborative work</td>
<td>Learner-centered, constructivist approaches</td>
<td>Learner choice, design and revision</td>
<td>Responsibility for learning (personal, individual), diversity and inclusivity</td>
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<td>Integrative and interdisciplinary learning</td>
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<td>Shared purpose</td>
<td>Shared decision making</td>
<td>Audience beyond the teacher</td>
<td>Service and compassion</td>
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<td>Authentic assessment</td>
<td>High expectations and multiple measures of progress</td>
<td>Audience beyond the teacher/rigorous assessment and evaluation</td>
<td>Success and failure</td>
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<td>Individualized and learner-centered approaches</td>
<td>Every child is known well, and every child’s participation is needed and wanted</td>
<td>Learner-centered, constructivist approaches</td>
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<td>Responsibility for learning (personal, individual), diversity and inclusivity</td>
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<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Reflection is an essential activity</td>
<td>Solitude and reflection</td>
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<td>Academic rigor</td>
<td>Sustained academic work that draws upon and contributes to community</td>
<td>Academic integrity</td>
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<td>New teacher and student roles</td>
<td>Students practice new skills and responsibilities</td>
<td>Teams of teachers</td>
<td>Teacher as facilitator and collaborator</td>
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<td>Exploration and creativity</td>
<td>Imagination and creativity</td>
<td>Curiosity… time to experiment</td>
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**Patterns in Practice**

Comparing lists of principles is valuable. Doing so begins to get at what is truly critical and defining about community-rooted learning — as well as how different approaches to this work distinguish themselves. But it is only by listening to the stories of individual schools, community projects, teachers and students that these principles come alive. Let us turn to those stories — using them as an entry point and a way of explicating some of the patterns in community-rooted practice.

**Start somewhere, go everywhere**

“I wanted them to know this year was going to be different right from the start. On the first day of school, as soon as all the children were in their seats, before anything else, I took them outside. Our year began outdoors and ended outdoors. In between we were very busy. My goal was to combat what Robert Michael Pyle calls “the extinction of experience.” I told my students we were going to learn about their place by going out and exploring. I wanted time to gain a greater sense of wonder, joy, knowledge and reverence for the natural world. If nothing else, my students and I were going to experience the outdoors” (Kreisberg in Orion Society, 1998).

Daniel Kreisberg — a Bayville, New York, elementary school teacher — adds his voice to a chorus of principles, programs and advocates. Together, they affirm that the move outside the classroom, into the community and environment, is the critical move of place-based education. But the move outside is accompanied by a critical pedagogical shift, a new way of teaching. This new way of teaching comes to light by watching the actions of its practitioners:

Tom Wessels, a bearded, suspendered college professor from Antioch College in New Hampshire, pauses for a moment in his walk in the woods, looking down at the ground with something close to a smile. The ten or so high school students trudging behind him, some in hiking boots and fleece, some dressed more for New York City than for the early morning cold, pause as well. They are still shaking off the previous night’s sleep, but are awake enough that they lean in to hear what Tom sees.

“See this place where the land dips down, forming a little bit of a ledge? That’s a plow terrace, and you can see it continuing on in a straight line along the contour in either direction. What do you see uphill?” The students offer that the land is smooth — a clear sign of cultivation. “What about downhill?” Cradles and pillows — the palimpsest of scores of fallen trees, never written over by a plow.

The class moves on, deeper into the woods. Students toss out questions between Tom’s lessons — “What does it mean if…”? They are eager to press the professor for his advice on their plots — the pieces of land they are studying all semester through constant and lingering visits. Tom responds willingly, but often with more questions than answers. The students eat it up. When Tom makes his bi-annual trip to the Mountain School, he is received as something as a guru. For the students, Tom wrote the book — their environmental studies textbook, Learning to Read the Landscape. As class breaks up, students sheepishly pull out their texts for him to autograph.

If every discipline has its way of teaching — science through lab experiences, art history through close examination and comparison of related works — this is the pedagogy of place-based education. Look closely. Ask questions. Know the signs — of old farmhouses, of fire, of a forest left alone a hundred years. Tell the story — connecting a billion years of geology, 100 centuries of plants turned to soil, and 30 generations of farmers, stone walls, and cows with their roots across the Atlantic. Grasp a planet’s worth of history — and see the touch of human hands — in the smallest square of earth.
One need not be in the mountains of Vermont to use this approach to teaching, nor even in the outdoors. The same skills of observation, and the same way of starting with the concrete and moving to the global, is described by Harper (1997) as she argues that historic sites are rich sites for learning:

“Places have powerful stories to tell. They speak through relationships to their settings, their plan and design, their building materials, their atmosphere and ambience, their furniture and other objects they contain. They can evoke the ghosts of people who once lived and worked there. These places provide physical evidence of how broad currents of history affect even small communities. Supplemented with primary or secondary written and visual materials, they also teach such skills as observation, working with maps, interpreting visual evidence, evaluating bias, analysis, comparison and contrast, and problem-solving.”

The practice of place-based education is anchored by an inductive approach to thinking and learning. The stuff of learning is primary source material, to borrow the language of historians — physical objects, interview transcripts, the landscape itself. The process of gleaning lessons from these primary sources starts with the concrete and moves to the abstract and the larger-scale. This allows students to start with the local, but make constant connections with global issues and abstract lessons that would otherwise be out of reach. In the words of one staff member at the Food Project, a Boston-based organization, “you start by touching dirt, and go into the most complicated systems in the world.”

**Students will be able to...**

The young people of New York City’s Educational Video Center (EVC) take their craft seriously. “We believe that when you pick up a camera you are arming yourself,” argues a student-written manual. “Video can give you the potential to bring people together, to make people understand one another, or to kill whatever silence hovers over any issue(s) you are interested in.” The products of their learning experiences — most about the neighborhoods in which these young people grow up — have done all of the things the manual describes, whether they are aired in housing complexes, in school classrooms, or on national television. The young filmmakers clearly understand that their videos can have serious implications — and serious critics, as students’ videos are regularly aired to an audience of community members in a setting where feedback and suggestions for revisions are encouraged. 4

If moving outside is the first step in community-rooted learning, end products like EVC videos are its culmination, its fruits. Educators often have their proudest moments when describing these tangible and telling products. These products deserve their pride. Mark Basnage, whose school sits on a ranch in Arizona, concludes a nature writing course with the charge that each student creates a book, of their design, containing a selection of their work for the semester. Jennifer Danish’s students in New Jersey create a magazine on the local environment. Bonnie Dankert’s Santa Cruz students create a huge map of the region’s ecological and cultural features on the pavement outside the school building. 5 Aya Reiss, a teaching intern at the Mountain School, is quick to share copies of the environmental science textbooks that students create each year — products more personal and more demonstrative of learning, richer in content and meaning than what is usually labeled as either “student work” or “textbook.”

Given that documentary work and creative expression are prized activities for many place-based educators, it should not come as a surprise that tangible products like these play such a central role in community-rooted learning. These products serve critical functions in place-based education. They engage students in the challenging processes of synthesis and meaning-making; in all of the examples above, students are asked to

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4 Based on a case study written by What Kids Can Do staff that appears in Tolman & Pittman (2001).

5 The stories of these three teachers, and a number of others who received support from the Orion Society, are told in the 1998 publication, *Stories in the Land: A Place-Based Environmental Education Anthology.*
pull together lessons and ideas over many weeks or months into a coherent work. Equally important, these products are compelling demonstrations of student knowledge. In an era where policy makers struggle for ways to measure student learning against high standards, products like these offer a rigorous and meaningful assessment of progress. And as school reformers increasingly emphasize the value of looking at student work, these students provide something worth looking at.

However impressive the maps and textbooks created by these students — and however powerful an assessment tool they may be — the story of Educational Video Center raises the student products bar to another level. The performances that demonstrate their knowledge have a real audience and purpose — they are “authentic” in the truest sense of the word. Such products provide a genuine barometer of how much students have learned, in a context of real importance. They also induce a level of motivation qualitatively different than inspired by the make-work assignments and pencil and paper tests to which students are accustomed. These students and their products have realized a guiding principle of the Foxxfire (2002) approach to learning — that “there is an audience beyond the teacher for learner work”:

“It may be another individual, or a small group, or the community, but it is an audience the learners want to serve or engage. The audience, in turn, affirms the work is important, needed and worth doing.”

Products like those produced through Foxfire and EVC, then, take community as their initial inspiration and as their final audience. In the process, these assessments contribute to another defining principle of community-rooted practice — the robust sense of shared purpose that characterizes much local learning.

No passengers
My 15-year-old guides claim that they were loners when they came to the Food Project a year ago. I do not believe them. As they lead me around the Food Project’s urban site — a patchwork of plots covered in rich spring soil, brought in by the dump truck load to cover the burned-over remains of a generation worth of white flight — they describe everything as “ours.” They explain planting decisions, community revitalization strategies, and efforts to reclaim additional abandoned lots in ways that give away their deep understanding of the place and of the Food Project’s work. And again, all of it is what “we” did — even if the dump truck loads of compost arrived years before these two young women had even heard of the Food Project.

As far as I can tell, my guides’ knowledge does not come of lectures or detached observation. Theirs is the understanding that comes of doing, of sharing in a purpose larger than themselves. They have worked this soil, planted these seeds, come to own this organization and its work.

“We are crew, not passengers,” exhorts a design principle of the Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound (2001) schools, “and are strengthened by acts of consequential service to others.” This sentiment is a compelling creed for place-based educators. Place-based learning is rich in opportunities for contribution, shared work, common meaning — for the type of learning that Barbara Cervone of What Kids Can Do describes as “powerful learning with a public purpose.” This sense of common purpose is without doubt a defining feature of community-rooted practice.

It is easy to feel out of place as a visitor to the Food Project, the Mountain School and organizations like them — because they are so rich in purpose, in jobs and functions, for those who learn there full-time. Often, this sense of purpose is achieved through significant work that has a function larger than learning — the growing of food at the Mountain School and the Food Project, or the doing of genuine scientific research at Lubec High School, for instance. At the Peddie School in New Jersey, this work is given a real-world edge when students generated the list of jobs necessary to create a magazine, then applied for those jobs that most interested them — demonstrating the value placed on these roles (Orion Society, 1998). At its richest,
students’ work is critical to the success of the learning environment, treated as valuable in its own right, and seen as an integral part of the environment’s learning work.

While common purpose is often built through shared, meaningful action — as it was for my guides at the Food Project — it is often given deep roots through a sense of ownership and responsibility for the environment and the community of which the students are a part. These young women are not the only ones who use the first person plural to describe their schools’ or organizations’ work. Such collective language is indicative of what happens when young people learn that a place is theirs, to care for and steer.

In it together

The Mountain School community — 45 students and a dozen faculty and staff — is small enough that it can sit comfortably in a circle in the school’s dining hall. In fact, students and staff do so every morning, and for a full class period once a week. In a discussion facilitated by a different young person each morning, students and teachers share announcements, hear a student-compiled update on current events, take on the small and large problems of the school. A student closes the meeting with a performance — a song, a poem they have written, something of themselves.

A second circle, containing the school’s entire faculty, forms at least once a week; this circle fits around a single large table in one of the school’s classrooms. The meeting ends with a recitation of about 15 students’ names. After each name is called, a teacher explains why she wanted to talk about this student with the faculty — nearly as often to offer praise as to discuss a problem. The teachers pull their chairs in closer, listen carefully, offer their own experience working with that student and discuss what to do next.

In large part because of these two circles, it’s hard to go unnoticed or unheard at the Mountain School.

In the process of reaching out to the larger community, places like the Mountain School almost inevitably create a tight and cohesive community among learners and teachers. In the Mountain School’s case, the sense of community is in large part a privilege of its small size. But even in larger communities, the practice of community-rooted learning tends to build a strong social fabric among participants.

Social connections are strengthened in part because collaborative learning and work is a central practice of place-based learning. Students tend to tackle community problems, do research, even go out into the field in cooperation with their fellow students. Doing serious community-based work often requires that students team up in order to get the work done. Moreover, most place-based teachers are enamored of collaborative learning experiences, perhaps because place-based education and collaborative learning grow from the same progressive roots. Like all good teachers, place-based educators tend to put a great deal of time and energy into the function of the learning group — into matching students with different and compatible skill sets, into the initial process of building mutual knowledge, into the creation of a community that can manage and lead itself.

While drawing on collaborative learning theory, the sort of group work and community that place-based education encourages is distinctive and uniquely powerful. Naturally, the links to local environment and community are at the heart of this strong practice of collective learning. Take away the place, and you cut the roots of the learning community. The staff of the Food Project argue, for instance, that without the connection to the land and the hard work it requires, all of the team-building activities “would feel a little campish.” According to Jose, who grew up in the Food Project and now directs its school-year program, “the connections happen when young people are on the land together.”

As if young people mattered

For the Work Force program in Cambridge, the young person is always at the center of planning, programming and decision making. The program, which makes its home inside Cambridge’s public housing department and serves public housing residents, sticks with young people from the time they...
enter junior high through their graduation from high school. Along this long road, the first job of the program’s school-community advisor is to treat the young people as individuals. An individual service plan links the young people with the basic supports — health care, counseling and the like — that young people need as a launching pad. A series of closely connected internships with area businesses are selected based on the young people’s interests and skills. And these work experiences are woven together with intentional skills-building courses and students’ school experiences — again, the connections made by the students’ advisors (who actually have offices inside students’ schools, as well as in their housing developments), and by their individual service plans.6

As much as the young people and staff involved in community-rooted learning talk of their connections to each other, and of the community they share, they still place consistent value on the individuals that make up the community. At the Mountain School, for instance, students take part in extended “solos,” bringing with them only the bare essentials for four days alone in the woods. They talk of a newfound self-awareness. They laud the school for trusting them to make good choices and respecting their autonomy. And, as with the young people of Work Force, each of their learning experiences is tailored to their interests and needs through good advising, self-directed projects and the like.

The Work Force and Mountain School stories speak to the many ways in which community-rooted learning treats young people as if they matter. These efforts strive to balance the pull of community with the need for individual creativity and freedom. They build in significant opportunities for time apart from the community, providing space for reflection, grounding and simple privacy. The Mountain School and Work Force emphasize that learners should make their own choices and steer their own way; in Foxfire (2002) schools, for instance, “the work teachers and learners do together is infused from the beginning with learner choice, design and revision.” They strive toward flexibility and personalization in all they do, so that individual students get the supports and opportunities they want and need.

These principles of personalization are features of any good learning environment. But rooting learning in the community provides new and robust opportunities to put these principles into action. Project-based learning builds in opportunities for both work with peers and individual exploration, helping achieve a mix of collaborative and independent work. Space alone — so hard to find inside a crowded school building — is abundant when students can make their ways outside the classroom. Moreover, “natural” landscapes do, as environmental educators argue, offer a unique setting for time apart. Students’ choice and autonomy are also expanded when learning takes place outside the classroom, where a much richer variety of learning options confronts them. As Delonte from School Without Walls puts it, having to navigate this enriched variety of learning experiences “makes people in our school a lot more independent and focused.” The same rich array of opportunities means it is possible to link young people with the set of learning opportunities that best meets their needs and interests — that is, to personalize their learning.

**New roles**

Michele looks up from the row of strawberries she’s weeding and glances around at her dozen companions — one or two of them old enough to be her grandparents, several there with an alumni group from one of the nation’s top small colleges, a couple from the wealthy suburbs that border her struggling Boston neighborhood. She’s still worried about one man who’s working with almost comically slow precision, but lets him be, and turns her attention to a young woman who’s talked little all day. After five minutes of chatting across the weeds, she knows it is time to wrap up for the day, and gathers the group around her to debrief them on the day’s work. At her prodding, the girl she’s just been talking to volunteers to share the day’s progress with the other crews: a few hundred feet of potatoes planted, five rows of strawberries clean of weeds, a hundred melon seedlings now happily in larger pots.

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6 Based on an interview with Dennis Mink, director of the Work Force program.
It is often said that the student-teacher interaction is the heart of the instructional encounter. As a result, it is critical to think about community-rooted learning in terms of this encounter. How do the interactions between students and teachers change as a result of the sorts of learning experiences described here? And how do the roles of each partner in this interaction shift when learning is rooted in community?

Michele’s story provides clear answers to these questions. The role of the student, as in Michele’s case, involves active engagement with the material of learning, rather than passive reception of information. This active engagement has a cognitive side; students like Michele reach outward to interact with new ideas and information, manipulate that material, and construct meaning for themselves. Local learning is active in a more concrete sense, as well. Students conduct and analyze interviews. They survey and make maps. They build things that were not there before. They take walks in the woods. Both aspects of active engagement are essential features — and benefits — of community-rooted learning.

Along with more active roles, students take on new responsibility for managing their own learning. At the Mountain School, many students describe a new level of understanding of how they learned, and a new sense of ownership of the learning process — supported by teachers who encourage their students to dive into the local environment, and to make plans for their own learning. Michele’s story is the extension of this new understanding of the learning process: Students taking on responsibility for helping others learn.

For students to take a more active and self-reliant role in their own learning, the role of teachers must also shift. Before Michele managed the work of others, for instance, the staff of the Food Project coached her as she rehearsed, asked her probing questions that tested her knowledge, gave her honest feedback on her performance and then left her to do her job. At the Mountain School, students speak of deep knowledge of their teachers – and deep friendships with them – that comes of sharing a small, democratic community. To say that teachers become facilitators — an overused and underexplained word — masks the complexity of the work. But to say that teachers facilitate an encounter with the place — with questions, scaffolding, skill building, advice and prodding — is to accurately describe what they do.

These shifts in teacher and student roles are not inevitable. But one fundamental change in student and teacher roles is unavoidable. Community-rooted learning introduces a third player into the basic instructional encounter. The place itself joins teacher and student as a defining player in learning. To say this is a “new” player is misleading; the environment is always already there. As Huse (1995) argues, “…learning occurs in the continuous relationship between the child and the environment; the child responds, organizes and adapts to that environment and is altered during the course of the interaction. Such experience organizes and reorganizes the child’s conceptual structure.”

Though always present, the environment is seldom acknowledged as a part of the learning encounter in most schools. What really happens in community-rooted learning, then, is that the context for learning is recognized and leveraged as a powerful force in instruction.

Of a piece

“I can say two things for certain about what happens here,” Anne, the school’s director, offers to a room full of education majors eager to get their heads around what makes the Mountain School work. “First, the young people who come here learn a lot about themselves.” This much is clear from the students’ sharp analysis and ability to tend their own learning. “Second, we work hard to get over the bifurcation between school and home, work and play. Students have an experience that’s more whole and connected than what they’ve known before.”
It’s not that students’ lives are less hectic at the Mountain School than in their usual over-programmed, upper-middle class lives. By the end of a Mountain School day — starting at 7 and continuing almost non-stop through to 9:30, with homework to be done afterwards — I, like all this community’s members, am exhausted. Anne’s point — one I hear repeated by students and teachers — is different. For these students, for one semester, everything is connected.

For one thing, nearly all of a student’s experiences — work, living, play, learning — happen on a parcel of a few hundred acres, and are shared with a little more than 4 dozen compatriots. The common base in land and community means that connections across classes and parts of students’ lives happen without trying. It helps, as well, that all of the day’s divisions are fluid and flexible — no bells mark the changing of class periods. But the intentionality of the school’s teachers makes just as much difference as does anything related to the school’s structure.

Like shifts in teacher and student roles, experiences of integration are not an inevitable result of community-rooted learning. But they are infinitely more likely to occur when learning is local — and, as the stories of Work Force, the Mountain School, School Without Walls, and the Food Project demonstrate, this possibility is realized in many place-based learning environments. These examples underscore three distinct ways in which rooting learning in its place can support integrated learning.

As at the Mountain School and Work Force, place-based learning can pull together all the parts of young people’s often fractured lives — school, home, work, friends and community. For the first time in many young people’s lives, all of these settings for learning and doing are “of a piece,” thanks to their common grounding in the local environment and the intentional efforts of their teachers to connect them.

The Food Project demonstrates a second, vital kind of integration that good community-rooted practice encourages. Young people enter the organization through a single door — a summer of hard work on the land. But from there, they move into a remarkable number of new learning experiences — environmental justice internships, crew leader positions, school-year programs, cooking classes, community organizing opportunities. The fact that all of these experiences are rooted in land, work and community means that learning is integrated across time — that the experience is a continuous and consistently building one.

But from a school’s perspective, the most vital form of integration is that which Delonte describes — in which students “always have a connection back to reality, back to life, back to the other disciplines inside the school.” What Delonte values is integration across subjects and courses — interdisciplinary integration. Such integration is vital, according to Delonte, “If you don’t have something tying it all together, it just seems like you’re going to eight different teachers, learning eight different lessons.”

All of these forms of integration — but especially the third variety — benefit from the fundamental character of the local as a focus for learning. Community, place, environment — these are powerful words for educators committed to making learning local. These words have an important common feature: Each reflects the integrative nature of learning that is rooted in locality. With these interdisciplinary, integrative ideas as its starting point, community-rooted learning — whatever names it goes by — is at its core about joining and synthesizing disparate perspectives, ideas and disciplines into something more coherent. Perhaps Elder (1998) puts it most succinctly: “Environmental education seems less a new discipline than a recovery of the connections from which disciplines originally emerged.”
Organic-Grown

The most important principle of community-rooted learning runs somewhat counter to the entire notion of principles. Talking about generalizations, or even themes, is in some way in conflict to the nature of place-based learning — because community-rooted learning is a response to local realities.

All of the learning environments whose stories have been told here are products of their home places. The Food Project is a response to a suburban community that values land preservation and healthy food, and to an urban neighborhood eager to reclaim abandoned lots and full of gardeners ready to build community. Over time, it has grown to fill many community needs — adding a commercial kitchen, education on how to remove lead from the soil, a volunteer program that reaches thousands of adults with the program’s core messages. As the organizations’ leadership begins to think about their growth strategy, they struggle to figure out what replication of something so local might mean. The Mountain School has the landscape in its name, indicating the degree to which it grows out of a particular geology and ecology. Even the writers taught in its English classes — Romantics like Thoreau and contemporary writers like Bill McKibben — are rooted in the same landscape as the school. School Without Walls, Lubec High School and Work Force have developed as they have because of their home places.

All this should not be read as a rejection of either common principles for community-rooted learning or of a movement or field that joins local efforts together. All the themes already described hold true across localities. But the uniqueness of each experiment in place-based learning does have implications for those committed to creating more schools rooted in these principles. It is that challenge — of rooting more learning environments in their local places — to which we turn next.

How Do We Support and Encourage It?

Putting these practices and principles into action — in a way that is the rule rather than the exception — requires that schools and communities change the conditions in which education happens. I ask David Sobel, whose work with the Co-SEED schools around New England has netted a handful of community-wide place-based education efforts, to identify the conditions that seem most critical to him. His answers range from the profound to the technical. “First, the hackneyed part,” he begins. “You’ve got to have administrator support and buy-in. Jerry Lieberman (of the State Environment and Education Roundtable) says that knowing their test scores will go up is what gets principals to buy in. Therefore, good evaluation and data collection — both providing access to the stuff that already exists, and assuring administrators that you’re going to collect data as you institute an innovation — will let administrators feel like they can bow to the god of national testing.” Clearly, community ownership is just as vital. Sobel goes on to name several other conditions, which resonate with other visits and conversations.

Connections hardware — physical infrastructure. “At the other end of the spectrum,” Sobel continues, “we’ve always said phones in classrooms are important. As schools grabbed onto computers, we leaped over the technology of phones. At one point, we were talking about getting phones in classrooms — having teachers not have to flow through the office structure to facilitate community connections.” Phones are just one example of the sort of physical infrastructure that schools and communities need to facilitate community-rooted learning. Reliable and flexible transportation and facilities conducive to this kind of teaching — spaces in the community that will fit a class of students, for instance — are also critical.
Flexibility and freedom. Sobel repeats a logistical irony I have heard many times: “It gets increasingly difficult to do this work as you move up through the grades. In elementary schools, it’s relatively easy, since individual teachers have at least some control over how time is spent. In middle schools, it is still possible, since many are now working in teams with other teachers, and can negotiate for the time they need. In high schools, it’s relatively impossible, given the short class periods.” For teachers to make connections to the community, they must have the freedom to do so — and not just in terms of time. They need flexibility in terms of accountability, curricular requirements and administrative guidelines, as well.

Resources and capacity. Freedom from constraint is a starting point for place-based education, but only the most enterprising of teachers will be able to make it happen without additional support. Sobel describes a small grants program for teachers as a core part of the Co-SEED model, encouraging teachers to try new practices. He also points to staff development as part of the equation, as even enthusiastic teachers need new skills in order to put new ideas into practice. Capacity outside of the school is just as vital — in the form of community partners with expertise and people-power, public engagement, etc.

Connections software — people and knowledge. Rooting learning in community also takes a sense of the place and ways of greasing the wheels of connection — “software” that complements the “hardware” of telephones and vans. Someone other than the classroom teacher is often needed to make connections happen — a community-school facilitator, located either inside the school or in the community. But a broader-based, participatory way of facilitating the connections is also important. Many developed efforts have steering committees, advisory bodies, or other institutions that bring school and community together to steer the effort. In addition to bodies like these, Co-SEED has developed a unique way of building knowledge of the community and connecting to residents — a “community profile”:

“One of the things we do is run a big community profile — intended as a town meeting, over a day and a half, very structured way of identifying what people like, what they’re concerned about, action groups around the issues. The problem then becomes that it’s a one-time thing. That’s what we’re trying to work on now — how to keep up this sort of connection.”

The Co-SEED Model

The six existing Co-SEED sites are built around a four-way collaboration between a school, community organizations, an environmental learning center and the Co-SEED staff housed at Antioch New England. Co-SEED brings to each school a half time environmental educator, a school-community facilitator who spends a day each week at the site, a small grant fund ($4000/year) to support teacher-initiated efforts, training and support to create the community profile described above, and support in evaluating the effort. Schools, for their part, commit staff development time, make sure that teachers are committed to making this happen in the classroom, orchestrate community process, act as the fiscal agent and participate in training opportunities. The range of community partners varies from site to site; the organizations coming to the table include the local historical society, city government, and a parks and recreation department in one community, for instance. The two staff positions funded through Co-SEED, and a steering committee that includes community members and school administrators, are the ones responsible for making the connections happen — and do a remarkable job of it, judging from the learning experiences that abound at the Co-SEED schools (Sobel, 2002).
Pulling It Together: Models for Facilitating Connections

Building a support structure that creates these conditions will always be a challenge and a long-term process. But doing so without some sort of blueprint is particularly daunting. Luckily, schools and communities interested in building the support structure have models to draw on. In addition to the Co-SEED model, several other sorts of structural arrangements are in place around the country:

**Worcester Public Schools.** Two years ago, Carnegie Corporation funding helped the Worcester community engage in a deep examination of how the city’s schools do business. One results of this process is a new commitment to community-connected learning, and to linking opportunities for youth development in community and school. The efforts are beginning to bear fruits — through stronger partnerships between schools and the city’s universities, museums and community organizations, for instance. But district-level commitments are the most innovative part of Worcester’s efforts. Several new positions have been created — community education, family involvement and community resources facilitators housed at the district and in community agencies, as well as “community resource liaisons” with responsibility for each of the district’s schools. These new positions — and a commitment to create “student success plans” that bridge school and community for every student — mark a major investment in place-based education.

**CBO Schools.** In a publication that draws on a year of study, Smith and Thomases (2001) profile a unique model for community-rooted learning — public schools run by community-based organizations. Some made possible by charter school legislation, others by conscious efforts to encourage organizations to start small schools, these institutions are a natural starting point for place-based education. The organization’s existing ties to community members, other institutions and the place open up remarkable learning opportunities based in the locality. Simultaneously, these institutions operate with a degree of flexibility not found in most public schools. They tend to have more control over staffing issues, how the day is divided, assessment, etc. — the sort of structural conditions that make place-based learning possible.

**Work Force.** The Work Force program is structured around the notion that learning at home, in school and in the community should be connected. The program is sponsored by the Cambridge, Massachusetts, Housing Authority and is based where young people live, three of the city’s large housing developments. But it also has offices inside the schools and strong relationships with the 65 businesses in which Work Force young people have internships. How does it connect these three worlds? Three teacher/counselors spend part of their time in each “world,” connecting youth with needed services, developing individual student plans, matching them with opportunities that meet their needs. Strong partnerships with businesses, schools and parents also help connect young people’s learning; for instance, the program invites teachers into the housing developments, and helps parents advocate for their children in schools. A culminating portfolio — encompassing school, internships and community-based experiences — ties it all together.

**Communities and Schools for Career Success (CS²)** began in Massachusetts as a way to “reshape the relationships between schools and their communities and connect student learning and experience more directly to the world of work and the broader community.” In the communities where it works (now in California as well as Massachusetts), CS² builds partnerships among businesses, higher education institutions, community organizations and schools, focused around the goal of successful transitions to work. The glue of this effort is a team of “school-community entrepreneurs” who do everything necessary — building
relationships, incubating programs, convening meetings, finding resources, organizing the community, working with the media, training staff — to build the necessary connections. This model of dedicated staffing, sometimes housed in schools and sometimes in a community agency, is a useful way to think about the human resources necessary to make community-rooted learning possible.

“Beyond Structure”

Pulling together the lessons learned from two powerful approaches to school change — the Essential Schools model pioneered by Ted Sizer and the school-to-work efforts spearheaded by Jobs for the Future — Steinberg and her colleagues (1999) urge school reformers to think “beyond structure”:

“... reformers have seen schools make major structural changes... yet still fail to effect real change in instructional practices or the core beliefs that drive the school. Recent large-scale research on school change bears this out. An analysis of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's New Futures initiative ... found that unless restructuring is directed at a school's core beliefs and values, merely modifying organizational structures will have little payoff for students.”

The structural models proposed above are vital ingredients in the effort to root learning in community. But they are not, as Steinberg and her colleagues point out, enough. Their words bring us back to Sobel’s comment on the importance of administrator buy-in, however hackneyed he may claim it is. The support of principals is one part of the larger change in beliefs and commitments necessary to achieve change in schools. The engagement of community members, teaching staff and students is just as important. Building this commitment is the harder, and more important, work ahead for advocates of community-rooted learning. And it is crucial at the national as well as the local level.

Conclusions: Acting Globally to Teach Locally

Community-rooted learning is a powerful educational idea, sitting on the edge of the educational mainstream and struggling to become a core feature of the nation’s schools. What will it take for community-rooted learning to make this leap, for vastly larger numbers of America’s young people to experience the powerful learning experiences described in this paper? That is the next critical question for those convinced that learning should be local. In many ways, it is a question that runs counter to the notion of local learning. But it is, nonetheless, a critical question if we hope to make these powerful learning experiences available to more than a handful of students in exceptional schools. With a clear vision and some proven practices in hand, community-rooted learning is ready for the next leap.
Works Cited


