Our children are the keepers of our future... to prepare them for the future that they hold, we have to engage a process of learning that educates, enlivens, and transforms their inner being...The proper educational experience opens a child's heart and mind to lifelong learning, and it provides them with the self-knowledge and self-confidence needed to inspire transformational change. ***If we hope to change the world, we must first provide an environment for change to take place.***

~ Sherri Mitchell (Weh'na Ha'mu Kwasset), Sacred Instructions (2018)

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS BLUEPRINT

Transforming the School/Community Partnership

By Kathleen Kesson

"If we don't do the impossible, **we shall be faced with the unthinkable.**"

~ Murray Bookchin (1982)

"Another world is not only possible, **she is on her way.** On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

~ Arundhati Roy (2003)

Written by Kathleen Kesson, Ed.D.

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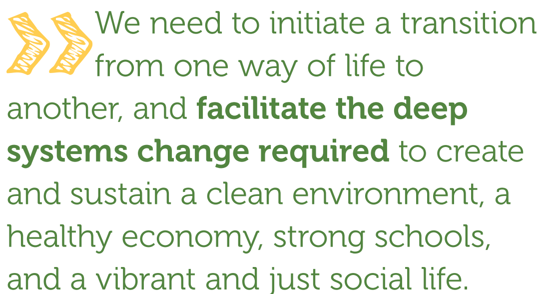
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If families and communities are the backbone of a strong society, schools are the nerve centers along its spine.

Schools and communities exist in a symbiotic relationship (GR: *sym*: together; *bios*: life). Life together. Educators are often charged with solving myriad social problems, but the reality is that schools are at best a reflection of the society in which they live. Our society faces enormous challenges: a global pandemic from which we are only now beginning to emerge, unprecedented extinctions, climate disruptions, deep economic inequalities, and extreme political polarization. It has become clear that we cannot just keep doing things the way we have been doing them if we are to survive and thrive. We need to initiate a transition from one way of life to another, and facilitate the deep systems change required to create and sustain a clean environment, a healthy economy, strong schools, and a vibrant and just social life. This is no easy task — it will take our best collective intelligence and commitment to action to bring about the changes we need. It is in that spirit that we offer this framework for thinking about how schools and communities can work together in deep symbiosis to reimagine their relationships.



We need to initiate a transition from one way of life to another, and **facilitate the deep systems change required** to create and sustain a clean environment, a healthy economy, strong schools, and a vibrant and just social life.

Educators in Vermont schools responded creatively to the challenges of the past year and a half, turning on a dime to figure out how to keep young people fed, engage students in new online learning formats, build and create outdoor learning environments, and address the multiple physical, social, and emotional crises faced each day by children and families during a pandemic. We know that even with heroic efforts, not all children and families fared well, and inequities that were present pre-pandemic are magnified now. Despite the enormous burdens educators and school leaders have born, they have still found time to explore new thinking about what they would like to see changed, post-COVID. They ask, do we merely want to return to "normal" after we come out of this crisis? Or must we acknowledge that normal was never working for everyone and that, in fact, our normal way of life was based on deep inequalities, unsustainable consumption patterns, extractive economies, the pollution of the planet, and a mode of life characterized by vast amounts of despair? Many of our wisest thinkers posit that there is no going back, that we have entered a new phase in human history that will require transformative thinking in all spheres of life if we are to survive and thrive. This concept paper takes this perspective as foundational, and draws on some of the best thinking of Vermont educators, non-profit service providers, scholars and activists with the courage and insight to imagine new possibilities for schools and communities.

Part I | **The Context:** Seizing the Opportunity to Reimagine Schools and Re-envision Communities

Articulates the context in which this transition is taking place, and invites you into this re-envisioning process.

Part II | **Localization**

Elaborates the idea of "localization," a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to building strong, resilient communities, eliminating poverty, strengthening democracy, taking care of the natural environment, and reviving rural areas. It provides our working definition of localization, and defines the many

elements of it that must be addressed for communities to thrive: agriculture and food sovereignty, energy, local manufacturing and business, local finance, community health and well-being, arts and culture, information systems, criminal justice, governance, and education.

Part III | Communities

Examines the nature of communities, and notes the important role that communities play in human development. We also acknowledge the many ways that modern communities have been shaped by corporate values and white supremacy culture, and present a case for beginning to heal our social fabric. We note the difficulty of thinking outside a dominant worldview, and the corresponding importance of widening our perspectives - listening to Indigenous knowledges and the wisdom of people and cultures who have lived in sustainable ways with their environments.

Part IV | Community Schools

Introduces the idea of community schools and presents the conventional understanding of community schools: the provision of a full range of social services including mental health, nutrition, child care, and extended learning. We note that while offering important temporary fixes, conventional models of community schools **can best be seen as a mitigation response** to the problems created by an economic system that is not organized to meet human needs. This concept paper, while adhering to the equity aims of the conventional discourse around community schools, **sets a higher bar** in that it proposes the parallel development of new political and economic structures that aim for the elimination of poverty. Community schools can either provide Band-Aids and treat symptoms, or they can be levers for the kinds of educational and social systems change necessary to really revitalize our local communities, equalize opportunities, and educate all young people with the knowledge, skills, and capacities they will need to survive and thrive in the complex and uncertain times ahead.

Community schools can either provide Band-Aids and treat symptoms, or they can be **levers for the kinds of educational and social systems change necessary to really revitalize our local communities,** equalize opportunities, and educate all young people with the knowledge, skills, and capacities they will need to survive and thrive in the complex and uncertain times ahead.

We then present a transformative vision of community schools and articulate their **new possibilities** as 'community hubs' — centers of healing (healing from pandemics, isolation, oppression, poverty, racism, and other social ills of the past and present) and community revitalization, resource centers, spaces for creativity and invention, places for young people to congregate and plan projects — places of learning for young and old with opportunities to connect young people with mentors in the community who can teach the skills necessary to

create a sustainable society (foresters, farmers, artists and artisans, inventors, builders, activists, etc.). We believe that Vermont, with its historic commitments to 'small d' democracy, its devotion to its local schools, and its many vibrant grassroots movements around racial justice, sustainable agriculture, food sovereignty, and social welfare is uniquely situated to create and implement community schools that might serve as models of how education and communities can partner in ways that foster community resilience, youth engagement, and participatory democracy.

Part V | Systemic Change

Provides a brief overview of systems thinking, and explains why, despite decades of school "reform," educational outcomes and student experiences have proven resistant to significant improvement. We suggest that efforts to "fix" schools and students in isolation from the larger social system are inadequate to the task of improving both learning and possible futures for all students, and call for a bolder, more comprehensive approach to **transforming** our interlocking economic, environmental, political, educational, and social systems.

Part VI | Community Engagement

Emphasizes the importance of expanding our thinking about community engagement. If our primary aim is to ensure schools and communities where all students and their families feel a sense of belonging and engagement, the process for getting there must feature broad community participation, with a diversity of income, race, gender, ability, age, newcomer status, language, etc. represented in all activities and reflected in the faces of leaders and decision-makers in schools and communities. For community schools to succeed, the assets of the community must be mobilized around the education of its youth, and strong partnerships among schools, families, non-profit community groups, activist organizations, labor unions, businesses, and government agencies need to be formed and sustained. Community participation must be valued, empowered and centered in reimagining schools, systems and policies, and youth leadership and full involvement needs to be at the heart of this.

Part VII | Why Vermont? Why Now?

Calls us to the question *Why Vermont? Why Now?* In the spring of 2021, legislators in Vermont introduced a bill to support community school pilot projects. Act 67 was signed into law by the Governor in June, and Vermont is now poised to begin its experiment with community schools. Though this is a time of great uncertainty, it is also a time of opportunity — a chance to build on our tradition of Town Meeting and local control in order to examine our collective values and reset our priorities. We can find innovative new ways of engaging communities

in meeting the needs of the present and planning for the future. We can commit to making young people an essential part of this planning. We can decide that we wish for schools to be vibrant spaces where all young people want to be — spaces of equity, learning, relevance, empathy, relationship, sustainability, and joy. We can focus on the ethic of care in our schools rather than the ethic of competition. And we can resist the call to continue to defund public education and instead find new progressive ways to fund what is most needed.

* * *

A Blueprint is a sketch, an outline of possibilities. It should be up to each local community to design and give life to their school, according to their unique needs, cultural aspirations, and capacities. We should avoid a cookie cutter mentality and instead, honor the creativity and intelligence of our population.

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The standardized schooling of our past is like the monoculture of agribusiness: it depletes the soil and relies on toxic inputs to continue mediocre, devitalized output. We have the opportunity now to invent community schools that resemble healthy ecosystems in their diversity, resilience, and generation of innovation and creativity. There is nothing in this document that is not aligned with movements and forces already in motion in the state — movements for more democracy, racial justice, regenerative agriculture, food sovereignty, equity, and renewable energy. What we have done is to connect the dots, and demonstrate the ways that taken together, these forces represent a deep systems change that creates fertile soil for the cultivation of community schools.

PART I • THE CONTEXT

September 2021. Vermont is emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, though we have failed to reach 100% vaccination rate, cases still emerge daily, and highly contagious variants of the disease are spreading fast in the U.S. Worldwide, economies are in shambles (even though the stock market remains healthy), and many people are struggling to meet basic needs for food, shelter, and health care. Though economic activity has resumed at varying paces, it is doubtful if the future of work will resemble the pre-pandemic past. The desire to 'get back to normal' is understandable, however most informed thinkers posit that there is no going back, that we have entered a new phase in human history that will require transformative thinking in all spheres of life if we are to survive and thrive.

Protests in major urban centers have been sparked by instances of racialized police brutality and murder and compounded by unmet socio-economic needs resulting from the pandemic, as well as long standing histories of racism, oppression and economic injustice. Fake news and conspiracy theories permeate both social and mainstream media. Resurgent right-wing domestic terrorism threatens the very foundations of our national democratic culture. These pressing issues reveal systemic and interrelated flaws at the core of our society including racism, materialism, inequality, propaganda, and poverty.

In a best-case scenario, vaccines may bring this pandemic under control, but

disruptions due to new or recurring pandemics, the climate emergency and its interrelated effects (species extinction, pollution, 'natural' disasters, mass migrations, and global conflict over scarce resources), are likely to lead to the periodic breakdown of ecological systems, resource distribution systems, economic systems, health systems, and governance systems. Many scholars point to the causal nature of a rapacious, globalized, capitalist economy which has both destroyed the balance of nature that sustains us and dispensed with social safety nets, rights, and justice for the sake of the profits of the powerful and wealthy. Vulnerabilities in supply chains during the pandemic exposed the down side of globalization and the international division of labor, as communities struggled to meet basic needs for medical equipment and other commodities.

We must simultaneously reimagine and build a different world, and **assist in the "unmaking" of the old one**.

This Blueprint takes as its primary organizing concept the idea that "localization" – the reimagining of a resilient place-based culture with a focus on an economy that meets the needs of all of its inhabitants, cultivates strong connections to the natural world, and produces much of what it needs as close to the source of consumption as possible, is the most promising recipe for human survival. In this context, we articulate a new role for the community school as a center of learning resources, connection making, peer-to-peer learning, community building, healing, and mentorship. In Vermont, the foundation exists for this, but there is an urgent need to reconceptualize many of our taken for granted assumptions about everything from the economy to education if we are to fully enact this new vision. We must simultaneously reimagine and build a different world, and assist in the "unmaking" (see Feola, 2019) of the old one. We have the opportunity here and now to reorder our values and priorities, restructure our relations with the natural world, and create just and responsive systems — of economics, education, and governance — to create a truly resilient society that works for everyone.

PART II • LOCALIZATION

Can we build an economics of happiness? Lighten our ecological footprint? Create resilient communities? Foster more meaningful relations with people, other species and with the land?

What Is Localization?

In the language of global economics, localization is all about adapting products made by large transnational corporations to local conditions (as in serving locally appropriate foods at McDonald's around the world). In contrast, this document defines it in a way best articulated by Helena Norbert-Hodge, author of *Ancient Futures*, and the founder and director of Local Futures and The International Alliance for Localization. In this paradigm, localization is a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to building strong, resilient communities, reducing poverty, strengthening democracy, taking care of the natural environment, and reviving rural areas. (See localfutures.org/about)

Its aim is to **revitalize rural economies, build local wealth and keep it within our communities,** protect the environment, and secure the means of production to create the products and jobs we need in ordinary times and in crises.

Creating thriving, resilient local communities does not equate to provincialism, or concern only for one's own locale. Isolation in the past has led to in-group/out-group exclusions, prejudice

based on ignorance, and narrow-mindedness. We have only to recall the ways that local communities in the United States created numerous private schools to avoid federal school integration mandates to remind ourselves that localism has not always nurtured the "good of the whole." New concepts and forms of localization must foster an expansive mindset, valuing all people equally, overcoming discrimination and racism, and dismantling hierarchies. As we move to strengthen locales, new configurations of connection and cooperation will develop amongst international groups, referred to now by some scholars as trans-localism. Global perspectives will be fostered, in which the 'good of the whole' is taken into consideration in all decisions about consumption and development. Once the province of futurists and counterculture advocates, the interrelated concepts of conscientious global interconnection, social responsibility, and localization have merged into mainstream consciousness with the recent pandemic.

Localization will look very different in particular places. In general, its aim is to revitalize rural economies, build local wealth and keep it within our communities, protect the environment, and secure the means of production to create the products and jobs we need in ordinary times and in crises. Localization has profound implications for the role of schools in society, how they are organized and for what purposes, what needs to be taught, and how youth might become more actively engaged in the lives of their communities. In Vermont, we have strong supporting legislation for this reconceptualization of schooling in the form of Act 77 (Flexible Pathways to Secondary School Completion, 2013) and Act 1 (Ethnic Studies and Social Equity Standards, 2019), as well as innovative and responsive practices by many educators, school leaders, and non-profit educational service providers. This Blueprint will address some of the fundamental educational elements that need to be reconsidered. First, a brief overview of what is meant by localization.

Elements of Localization

a. Agriculture and Food Sovereignty

There is growing awareness of the ecological consequences of a globalized agri-business model of production and distribution with its corporate control of genetically modified seeds, toxic pesticides, herbicides, chemical fertilizers, erosion of topsoil, overuse of antibiotics, and the exploitation of workers. In the current system, food products crisscross the globe in fossil-fueled chains of production, processing, and consumption.

Climate impacts such as floods and droughts, new pests and pathogens, changes in crop and animal breed viability, and fluctuating global temperatures all threaten the stability of this global food system. The current pandemic alone

exposed vulnerabilities in terms of transport bottlenecks, outbreaks of disease requiring the shutdown of meat processing plants, the scarcity (and risk) of agricultural labor, and the destruction of enormous quantities of milk, meat, fish, keg beer and many other commodities due to reduced demands for the products.

The localization of the food supply chain is a potential source of resiliency in rural landscapes, offering fresher, healthier food and benefiting the local economy as well as the environment. In the current pandemic, many small farms relying on mixed crops, flexibility in shifting markets, direct to consumer selling, farm-to-plate initiatives, and CSAs are thriving, while huge, monocrop farms have much more trouble recalibrating. It should be noted that "food sovereignty" is also a justice issue; for communities to be resilient, no one should suffer food apartheid ("food deserts"), food insecurity, such as that brought about by COVID-19, or lack access to farmland due to historically discriminatory or unjust circumstances.

Vermont consumers currently spend about 14% of their food and beverage budgets on locally produced provisions. Increasing that substantially would require, in addition to some modifications in dietary preferences, a large increase in staple crop production (corn, potatoes, wheat, barley, oats, legumes). Honoring the desire of many Vermonters to increase the diversity of our population it's important to expand the range of culturally relevant food products that are grown and consumed locally. To ensure the viability of agricultural economics, we need to find ways to make farmland available to persons who wish to farm, build on our strong tradition of farmer's markets, and expand venues for distribution in conventional grocery stores and food cooperatives.

Production of new agricultural products such as industrial hemp, which can create a wide array of products from food and fiber to building materials, needs to be accelerated. Research and development should be expanded on the creation of food forests, regenerative agriculture, sustainable and humane livestock production, hydroponics and aquaculture, and the ecological harvesting of wild and native foods in ways that honor Indigenous lifeways.

Vermonters have proven to be responsive to food insecurity during the COVID-19 crisis with increased donations to food banks and sharing produce from home gardens and greenhouses; these mutual aid efforts need to be firmly es-

tablished in our culture so that they can be easily activated on short notice. We recognize that while strengthening local production is key, maintaining some diversity in the food supply chain is also an important consideration.

b. Energy

Vermont has limited capacity for economically viable development of solar and wind energy without negatively impacting ecologically sensitive areas. Our capacity for in-state renewable energy may not be sufficient to maintain present levels of energy consumption. While the state, in partnership with business, needs to continue its efforts towards creating decentralized, renewable energy sources, it will be important to focus on local efforts towards conservation, efficiency, and reducing consumer demand, as well as upgrading the grid and implementing cutting edge technologies of energy storage. This is one area that is likely to require regional, not merely local, solutions.

c. Local Manufacturing and Business

The globalized economy relies on planned obsolescence, the stimulation of desire and ever-expanding consumer demands for new products, shifting production to the cheapest possible labor sources, and conducting operations where environmental protections and social benefits are lax or non-existent. While this has benefited consumers in mostly Western countries with an abundance of cheap goods, it has also resulted in enormous amounts of toxic waste and the exploitation of workers in many parts of the world. The neo-liberal deregulation of trade and commerce has enabled the planet's largest transnational corporations to engineer markets so as to minimize all of the costs of doing business, including their tax burden.

Locally owned, socially responsible businesses operate at a scale that allows for accountability and transparency, the minimizing of transport and packaging, and production that meets genuine human needs rather than the profit imperatives of distant shareholders. Local entrepreneurs, cooperatives, and small business owners provide employment, expand opportunities for new businesses, support the infrastructure and maintenance of their communities with their tax dollars, sponsor local social causes, and engage with community activities such as mentoring and fundraising. Place-based businesses are more likely to protect the environment where they live and work, in contrast to distant owners.

d. Local Finance

If local business is to thrive, monetary and finance systems that rely on publicly-owned banks and credit unions need to be strengthened. Local finance institutions can redirect money away from environmentally destructive infrastructure projects, and allow people to invest in their neighbors and their

community, keeping money in local circulation and enabling low cost start-up loans for small businesses. Attention needs to be paid to increasing support for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color)-owned businesses and financial institutions if we are to strengthen the cultural diversity of Vermont. Other approaches to localizing finance include the development of local currencies, barter systems, and time banking, maximizing the capacity of people to obtain goods and services that meet their needs within the local system. To the extent possible, critical social and ecological needs must be 'de-commodified' in a regenerative economy (See Hallsmith, 2019).

e. Community Health and Well-being

If we are to have truly healthy communities, we need to widen the lens through which we view health and well-being. Health is an individual matter (self-care, exercise, nutrition, prevention) but it is also a social issue requiring meaningful connections and vibrant relationships within the family, the local culture and the workplace. Beyond this, the health of a community is deeply connected to the health of the surrounding environment — clean water, breathable air, and healthy soil.

Despite decades of research and billions of investment dollars in Big Pharma, hospitals, medical schools and research centers, efforts to treat symptoms of disease at the molecular level through drug therapies have failed to solve the major causes of illness and death in modern society (hypertension, coronary heart disease, Type-2 diabetes, and the epidemic of emotional illness, addiction, and suicide), all of which have roots in societal dysfunctions. If we were to reorganize our social world to meet the deepest needs of our species for bonding, connection, equality, and meaningful work, while massively reducing the stress and despair of the modern world, we'd likely transition from a chronically ill population to a healthy one. Community wellness, a focus on prevention, and strong public health systems, coupled with a clean environment, widely distributed opportunities for healthy lifestyle choices (i.e. nutrition, exercise), and availability of (and research into) alternative healing systems, are all locally focused approaches with proven records of improved health outcomes. In addition to these measures, we have learned in

the current pandemic that access to medical care, vaccinations, and testing is crucial; universal coverage should be a given.

f. Arts and Culture

The arts are more than frivolous forms of self-expression and the exclusive property of elite museums and grand theaters; the arts are literally how we 'make' our world, bringing together ideas and forms into novel expressions that inspire and give us pleasure. For many who live in sustainable ways with their bio-systems, the arts — song, story, movement, melody, decoration, visual image, puppets, sculpture — encode the moral templates for survival. The songs and stories in ritual ceremonies of many people honor the ancestors, pay tribute to the forces of nature, and imbue all life activities with a sense of the sacred. Art can foster the social imagination, give rise to novel ways of thinking and problem solving, and awaken us to the beauty and harmonies of nature. In a society focused on localization and ecological sustainability, the arts are participatory experiences, not merely elitist spectator activities, and the gifts and talents of all are nurtured, that they may contribute to the making of culture.

g. Information Systems

The recent demise of traditional local newspapers is well documented, and the loss of advertising revenue due to the pandemic (estimated between 30-60%) is whittling away at what remains. Newspapers everywhere have furloughed reporters and reduced publication days. Experts in media economics estimate the loss of hundreds of local news outlets resulting from the current crisis. At least 1,300 U.S. communities have been dubbed "news deserts," ironically at a time when readership has skyrocketed; people want to know how the crisis is shaping up in their communities and how to protect themselves.

Democracy and civic engagement cannot thrive in the absence of information and investigative reporting. Research has shown that in the absence of strong local information ecosystems, corruption and political polarization increase, while voter turnout suffers. In Vermont, where information outlets are primar-

ily white-dominated, it is vitally important to center the voices, stories and perspectives of BIPOC and other marginalized groups in the interest of communicating a fuller and more accurate portrayal of ideas and events. While some large-scale projects may emerge to fill the reporting gap (such as Report for America, a sort of youth corps resembling Teach for America) communities will need to take responsibility for supporting existing professional outlets and develop alternative print, internet, and community radio and TV outlets. Broadband access needs to be universal, community supported, and publicly owned.

h. Criminal Justice

Vermont's incarceration system evolved over time with a desire for safer communities. While Vermont's incarceration rate is lower than that of the United States as a whole, it is higher than that in other Western democracies. Black, Latinx, and Indigenous populations are over-represented in the incarcerated population by up to five times more than the White population. If we are to revitalize communities, we need to examine the root causes of crime such as poverty, analyze racially over-determined patterns of policing and incarceration, and redirect resources to community-led safety strategies including restorative justice, harm reduction, affordable housing, youth programs, etc. (see static.prisonpolicy.org/reports/winnable2021.pdf for a more comprehensive overview of what needs to happen to transition to a more just society).

i. Governance

People Power is the key to halting the most destructive aspects of globalization. Important decisions about the health, economic welfare, and ecological well-being of communities are often made far from the people who will be most impacted. Small scale, face-to-face civic groups should ensure the inclusion of a range of interests and perspectives, build capacity for informed decision-making, debate the ethics of public choices, and foster accountability and transparency. Unmaking the economic devastation, ecocide, and erosion of community that has resulted from our current globalized system will require a substantial increase in civic engagement on the part of people in local communities, as well as education about the theory and practices of popular democracy. Attention will need to be paid to the ways that local control has too often served to oppress or marginalize people who have been under-represented and systematically under-resourced, and subject to stereotyping, implicit bias, explicit discrimination, microaggressions, and other exclusionary tactics.

Popular democracy requires the elimination of hierarchies (old over young, men over women, white supremacy, heteronormativity, ableism, etc.), and the creation of alternatives to the authoritarian institutions currently governing

production, governance, investment, and social life under our current system. Institutions such as employee- and consumer-owned cooperatives, trade unions, mutual aid societies, and credit unions are well established in Vermont; as of 2016, a new census counted over 130 local and democratically controlled cooperatives, and Vermont is unique among the states in its continuing tradition of town meetings (see Tokar, 2013). Vermont authors Clark and Teachout provided an important guide for "bringing decision-making back home" (2012); we have the foundation here for localizing democracy, but it needs to be modernized and revitalized. To strengthen democracy in a region, these decentralized, self-organizing entities will need to move towards larger confederations of People Power.

j. Education

Schooling is one of the most important ways that a society reproduces itself. In our current system, the ways that schooling in the United States reproduces class hierarchies and social inequalities is well documented. Less well documented are the subtle and overt ways that schooling has reproduced dominant cultural ideas about progress, achievement, merit, corporate culture,

meaning, our relationships with nature, etc. and the ways that these ideas foster consumer-dependent and environmentally destructive lifestyles.

Localization will help to revitalize rural economies, build local wealth and keep it within our communities, protect the environment, and secure the means of production to create the products and jobs we need in ordinary times and in crises. But if we are to re-imagine a different world, and create a just, responsive, and resilient society that works for everyone, then virtually every aspect of schooling needs to be reconsidered: how schools are organized and for what purposes, what is taught, and how youth might become more actively engaged in the lives of their communities. This Blueprint is meant to be a starting point for conversations about re-envisioning the relationships that must be forged between schools and communities if we are to survive and thrive in a future which is fast coming towards us.

What is a community? Donald Oliver (2002) talks about the three spaces that modern people occupy — the corporate space, where many people spend much of their time working for a wage, the nuclear family home, sort of a transport station to and from work and school where basic needs (rest, meals, nurturing, entertainment, etc.) are met and consumption patterns are established, and what he calls the "vital center" — that network of in-between places including small shops, cafes, arts and craft studios, community gardens, grassroots organizations, local theaters and music venues, parks, sports teams, churches, mosques, and synagogues, and nature centers. While the notion of a 'community' can extend across time and space (there are communities of professional practice, online video gaming communities, activist communities, political parties, etc.), it is this *vital center*, says Oliver, where we share the stories about each other's lives, talk through our mutual problems, engage in culture making and develop the "fuller potentialities of our human nature" (p. 2). It is this middle space — the vital center — with which we will be most concerned as we reconceptualize new roles and purposes of schools.

Human Development and Community

Little understood, but important to the transformation of our schools and communities, are the ways that our public and private institutions are shaped by what scholars call "white supremacy culture" (Jones & Okun, 2001). Modern

corporate work life is characterized by a certain kind of relationship: contractual, casual, transitory, technical, 'neo-cortical.' Schools, too, despite the efforts of caring teachers to address the social-emotional needs of young people, mostly mirror the corporate/work world that students are being primed for, with their focus on competition, academic achievement, ranking of students, and the meeting of externally imposed standards of production (i.e. test scores). In this scenario, older parts of the human brain and body — with their needs for human bonding, empathic connection, nurturing, caring, and community building — are neglected. The current epidemic of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, despair, addiction, and self-harm, traumas that have been compounded in the current pandemic and economic crisis, should be enough to convince us of the urgent necessity of revitalizing community — the *vital center* of our lives — and healing our social fabric.

Few models exist for creating schools and communities that foster the level of relationality, care, and interconnection necessary to forge the new social and ecological consciousness to help us navigate the present challenges. We first need to recognize that our institutions were created by human beings who were raised to think within a particular worldview, a materialist worldview which values individualism, achievement, competition, consumerism, endless growth, and capital accumulation, and is in large part responsible for a way of life now destroying the planet. And second, we might then turn to other ways of knowing, to the wisdom of cultures and peoples who live in more sustainable ways, to inform our way forward. Renowned ecologist and educational philosopher C.A. Bowers highlighted the importance of "taking seriously the ecologically sustainable forms of knowledge, values, technological practices, and sense of community that characterize cultures that have resisted the reductionism and consumer orientation of Western modernity" (1997, p. 146). Indigenous scholars suggest that "(t)ransforming the future of public education will require being more attentive to Indigenous peoples and the knowledges they bring, listening to those who have longstanding relationships with particular places within the lands upon which schools are built" (Jacob, et al, p. 158). We will address this further in the section on "decolonizing education."

The conversation about community schools in Vermont has begun. Legislation has been passed to support pilot projects. Will we think conventionally, aim for the status quo, and creep towards a more equitable, just, and sustainable social/educational system? Or will we grab this opportunity to exercise our social imaginations and think in transformative ways about the kind of future we want and the kind of schools that might help us get there?

Conventional Models

Community schools are defined by their promoters as "both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities." (Coalition for Community Schools)

The dialogue around community schools emerged from a consensus among liberal thinkers that the achievement gap between white dominant class students and low-income, immigrant, and students of color can to a large degree be attributed to out-of-school factors related to poverty, and that the barriers to academic achievement can best be addressed by expanding the role of the school to include wrap around family support services such as extended child

care, multi-faceted physical and mental health services, and meeting the nutritional needs of all children. Essential to the development of these full-service schools is coordination and collaboration between coalitions of state agencies, non-profits, school districts, and institutions of higher education. Community and parental involvement are encouraged. This aim to ensure more equitable academic outcomes for all students is at the heart of the community schools movement and parallels the many current efforts around educational equity in Vermont.

While meeting the needs of all children to increase equity is a laudable aim, it is important to understand that to a large extent the source of these barriers to academic success lies in the dominance of a capitalist economic framework that is corporate controlled, globalized, and designed to maximize profit, not meet human needs, and systemic inequities due to historic forms of oppression, marginalization, and discrimination. Though social problems of domestic abuse, criminal activity, mental and emotional illness, and addiction cross class lines, others such as food scarcity and homelessness result from poverty. As these problems make themselves felt in a community, new institutional configurations are designed to combat them, thus creating an ever-increasing government bureaucracy. As philosopher Ivan Illich noted so long ago in his still relevant critique:

Welfare bureaucracies claim a professional, political, and financial monopoly over the social imagination, setting standards of what is valuable and what is feasible. This monopoly is at the root of the modernization of poverty. (1971)

From this analytical frame, conventional thinking about community schools, while offering important temporary fixes, can best be seen as a mitigation response to the problems created by an economic system that is not organized to meet human needs and its corresponding hierarchical social system. This Blueprint, while adhering to the equity aims of the conventional discourse around community schools, sets a higher bar in that it proposes the parallel development of new political and economic structures that aim for the elimination of poverty and inequalities. Neither a dental chair nor the addition of an extra social worker can adequately address the injustices of the larger social context. To achieve maximum impact, the implementation of community schools needs to be partnered with both top down (policy and funding) and bottom up (activism) efforts towards localization, economic development, popular democracy, and community resilience. While promoters of privatization say that only private or charter schools, freed from certain layers of bureaucracy, can accomplish inno-

vative aims, the larger aims of democratization cannot be accomplished without the public accountability that comes with publicly funded schools.

Transformative vision of community schools

In this alternative paradigm, schools take on new roles as 'community hubs' — centers of healing (healing from pandemics, isolation, oppression, poverty, racism, and other social ills of the past and present) and community revitalization, places of learning for young and old, resource centers, as in Illich's "tools for conviviality" (1973), spaces for creativity and invention, places for young people to congregate and plan projects, opportunities to connect young people with mentors in the community who can teach the skills necessary for the transition to a more just and sustainable society (foresters, farmers, artists and artisans, inventors, builders, activists, etc.).

In PART II of this document, we listed a number of elements of localization. The educational opportunities in this approach to community development should not be underestimated: young people who are activists and advocates committed to social justice and equity at the intersections of race, social class, gender, and ability can lead their communities in the work to reexamine systems, policies and ways of being built on centuries of oppression. Depending on the community (urban/rural/suburban), its population density, and its priorities they can form a 'regeneration corps,' helping to heal our local ecology; they can intern on local farms and food production sites or create their own school-based projects (including urban roof and community gardens), learning contemporary, science-based approaches to agriculture as well as Indigenous and traditional practices that have evolved over time. They can learn eco-friendly design and building skills for green architecture; they can study with local artists, writers, musicians, and craftspeople, experimenting and innovating in the aesthetic processes of culture-making; they can intern with entrepreneurs in Maker's Spaces, inventing the tools of resilience. They can explore self-care and disease prevention to be strong and healthy, and learn about the plurality of cross cultural health systems; they can develop journalism skills, becoming the investigative reporters a successful community needs; and they can participate fully

in governance and social activism, learning civics and adding important youth voices to community decisions while becoming leaders in all of these areas and more. With the increased leisure time that could come from an economy focused on producing for human needs rather than for corporate profit, we could become a 'learning society,' and local schools could also serve adult learners, whether newcomers in Vermont wanting to learn English, people seeking to expand their job skills, or those wishing to cultivate a new craft from a community mentor — everything from micro-brewing to painting.

This expanded role of the community in the education of young people does not discount the important role of teachers, though this role has already been changing under the new obligations of Act 77. Teachers will continue to serve important functions in the guidance of young people towards their life and career goals: connecting young people to mentors in the community and ensuring quality experiences, providing subject matter learning to complement the extended learning opportunities students have in the community, assisting students in self-assessment and motivating them to meet 'proficiencies,' organizing and facilitating group learning experiences, and working with families to ensure the overall social and emotional well-being of students. It goes without saying that the success of this new model of sustainable and justice-oriented education will require the enthusiastic participation of innumerable stakeholders: community members and school boards, parents, school leaders, teachers, non-profit service providers, labor unions, and young people. Administrators and school leaders have important roles to play in educating the public about community schools, facilitating the design of new, responsive systems, becoming more attuned to the needs of marginalized communities, supporting their school staff in anti-bias work, and navigating the school/community partnerships.

The commitment to a sustainable economy/ecology, sometimes termed "degrowth," acknowledges the finite nature of resource extraction and material production. But it's important to note that non-material resources are infinite, and a slower, less resource intensive economy creates multiple opportunities for Gross National Happiness (GNH) to flourish, as we cultivate non-commodified,

communal pleasures including relationships, arts, crafts, slow living, time in nature, adventure, sports, ritual, ceremony, cooking, mutual aid, community-building, gardening, learning for its own sake, volunteerism, service, etc. Learning, appreciating, and adopting these ways of being start in the home and in the school and require support from all sectors of society.

Because systems change is complex, challenging, and to some extent, unpredictable, these efforts are likely to encounter resistance and calls to sustain the status quo, even when the status quo is leading to social harm and ecological devastation. It is in this regard that we might wish to heed the wisdom of the "Precautionary Principle," increasingly recognized as a foundation for decision making to protect human health and the environment. The Precautionary Principle, initially formulated as a guideline for environmental decision-making, enables us to take bold and courageous action in the face of threats to our well-being, even if the outcome is not 100% certain. Extractive capitalism, unlimited growth, and authoritarian governance threaten our well-being. Creating resilient communities and schools that are centers of bioregional economic and environmental learning, participation, advocacy, and democracy will enable us to survive and thrive.

Essential elements of strong community schools

a. Supportive Legislation

Policy at the legislative level can impede or support transformative innovations in education. Vermont's response to the many challenges of unequal student achievement, lackluster student engagement, low rate of post-secondary involvement in school or career, and poor preparation in '21st century skills' has been Act 77, legislation enacted in 2013 that builds on Vermont's long history of progressive educational innovations that can, in part, be traced all the way back to Harvey Scribner's 1969 "Vermont Design for Education." At the heart of Act 77 are three interrelated components: Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs), Proficiency-based Graduation Requirements, and Flexible Pathways to Graduation, which are considered the "three pillars of personalization" (See education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-introduction-to-act-77.pdf). There exist remarkable pockets of success in implementation in the state, but many schools are still struggling to enact the requirements and to resolve the contradictions between these approaches and old mental models of schooling. Consciously enacted with a commitment to equity, the elements embodied in Act 77 could support the revitalization of our communities in the following ways:

- Flexible Pathways open the door for students to become fully engaged in the life of their communities through credit bearing internships, work, apprenticeships, service, and other 'extended learning opportunities.'
- Flexible Pathways to graduation widen the field of what is valued in society; for philosopher Elizabeth Anderson, equality is the basis for a free society, and one basic way to expand equality is by expanding the range of valued fields within a society (Heller, 2018).
- Students find new meaning in academic subject matter when it is thoughtfully linked to real life experience, thus supporting a wider range of learners to achieve.
- Student engagement increases when their learning is connected to their interests and curiosities, and they experience choice, autonomy, and decision-making about what they learn and how they go about it.
- Alternatives to the classroom maximize the utilization of the intellectual capital and practical wisdom of our Vermont communities, bringing forth as mentors people on the cutting edges of social transformation — whether artists, solar engineers, musicians, organic farmers, foresters, inventors, yoga teachers, community organizers, socially responsible business owners, computer software designers, or holistic healers.
- Opportunities for representation on community boards and committees, leadership in activist causes and mutual aid, participation in elections, etc. all create pathways to increased civic engagement for young people.
- Students who have opportunities to make meaningful contributions to their local communities are more likely to make their homes and raise their families in that community.

Act 1 (2019) created The Ethnic and Social Equity Standards Advisory Working Group, and charged it with recommending updates and additional curriculum standards to recognize fully the history, contributions and perspectives of ethnic and social groups. This work is currently in progress, and ultimately will contribute to the cultural competency of Vermont students who will be living in an increasingly diverse, multi-ethnic society, and eliminate racial bias in the curriculum and in the school climate. The Education Justice Coalition of Vermont, which grew out of this working group, is committed to "the work to transform our Vermont educational system" and they call for "a grassroots movement working for these changes at the local level." ethnicstudiesvt.org/celebrating-the-progress-of-the-act-1-working-group

The multi-faceted work of these groups includes:

- The review of current educational standards to ensure that the histories and contributions of underrepresented groups are included;

- Robust professional development opportunities that provide teachers with the tools for curriculum revision and improvement;
- Enabling communities to recognize, respond to, and redress instances of racism, xenophobia, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia;
- Instilling students with cross cultural awareness, empathy across difference, and the disposition to treat all people with love and respect;
- The creation of a culture of belonging that is free from bias, discrimination, and oppression.

See ethnicstudiesvt.org

Act 77 and Act 1 provide us with the legislative umbrella needed for the creation of a system of flourishing community schools. They encourage us to think outside the boundaries that have constrained our imaginations about teaching and learning in the past. In contrast to mainstream trends in education—a national curriculum with common standards and rigid systems of accountability—diversified, decentralized, localized ecosystems of *personalized and equitable* educational opportunities in the context of highly engaged communities have the potential to enhance localization and participatory democracy.

b. Equity and Radical Inclusion

Education in modernity has been reduced to the social function of reproducing society (in our historical moment, one governed by a globalized, competitive, extractive, profit-driven economy) rather than critiquing and transforming it to be more just, more sustainable, and more joyful. The call for equity is a recognition that the world we live in is shaped by vast disparities in wealth, differential opportunities based on such identifiers as race, social class, gender, home language, sexual identity, and ability, and that many young people experience unequal treatment in schools and societies as well as multiple forms of oppression that limit their aspirations and opportunities. A careful examination of the language we use is called for: when we speak of "inclusion" are we calling for the integration of BIPOC into an existing white supremacist culture? Or of "adapting" a dominant curriculum so that people of differing abilities can "fit into it?" Or is this a call to work together, all of us, in the creation of a public education system that is accessible, equitable, responsive and radically inclusive of everyone, a new system that is free of oppression at its root?

If we do not wish to reproduce the dysfunctions of modernity, we must begin to understand education as essential to changing society from one based on

greed, inequities, and competition to one of equity and cooperation. For many people, equity in schools encompasses equal access and opportunities, and efforts to ensure that outcomes are not predictable by the identifiers noted above. We would argue these aims are necessary but not sufficient in terms of the transformations required to revitalize our economy and strengthen democracy. Efforts to advance equity must be coupled with a radical rethinking and in many cases a dismantling of our assumptions around merit, ranking, grading, hierarchies of subject matter, whose narratives and perspectives are represented in the curriculum, who holds power and authority within schools, bias in policies that police gender, race, religion (ex: dress code, school safety officers, etc.), what is considered valued knowledge, testing, and competition — the entire apparatus of our current system. If we continue to think of equity as only benefitting people who have been marginalized or oppressed, we will continue to miss the point. An equitable culture of liberation benefits all in many ways — including those people who have profited from positions of privilege.

> Diversified, decentralized, localized ecosystems of personalized and equitable educational opportunities in the context of highly engaged communities **have the potential to enhance localization and participatory democracy.**

c. Youth-Adult Partnership

Advancing equity requires a fundamental shift in the student-teacher relationship to one of partnership. The success of school transformation efforts rests on mobilizing young people — primary stakeholders in education — as partners in the change process. When youth work closely with adults toward shared goals, they gain skills and confidence for lifelong learning and civic engagement. When adults work closely with youth as partners, the opportunity to learn from their insights and unique perspectives often renews a professional sense of purpose and shifts teaching toward more learner-centered practices.

Youth are often overlooked as co-constructors of learning and agents of change in transforming education. Educators bring a wealth of professional expertise to reimagining education; they have a systems-level perspective and a wide array of knowledge and skill accrued over time. But youth have an insiders' perspec-

tive on the learning experience that adults cannot fully fathom. They are highly invested in shaping the world that will hold their life story and feel a deep desire to make a difference now. We have only to look at the leadership they are taking in Vermont around climate action and racial justice to see this.

Youth have the wisdom, creativity, and proven capacity to partner in school transformation efforts, ensuring integrity in the process. When young people are challenged to bring forth their best efforts, adults similarly rise to the occasion. Both parties grow in their understanding and commitment to change, grappling with the complexity of classroom learning and the school change process from the diverse perspectives of both key stakeholder groups. Youth/adult partnerships unleash a previously untapped source for enhanced problem-solving, increased engagement in learning and teaching, and expediting the creation of vital learning communities.

Creating and sustaining authentic youth/adult partnerships is no easy task. Few members of either generation have experienced this paradigm shift. The change can feel risky and raise fears, hidden assumptions, and confusion. Similar to any other culture shift, youth/adult partnership requires frequent tending through reflection, dialogue, and on-going goal setting. These are the means to fend off the human tendency to revert to the status quo, and instead, to move toward liberatory practices.

d. Decolonizing Education

Decolonization is a process of undoing colonizing practices through healing, cultivating critical consciousness, storytelling, restoring cultural practices and beliefs, the birthing of new ideas and thinking, and liberation from the physical, territorial, economic, cultural and intellectual shackles of oppression. It is a complex idea that carries different meanings for people depending on their cultures and histories. For Indigenous people, the concept cannot be uncoupled from issues of land repatriation, reparations, and the acknowledgement and honoring of treaties. For people of African descent in this country, the term implies, in addition to reparations, unraveling the racist policies and practices that emanated from the enslavement system at the root of the US economy that find current expression in segregation, disenfranchisement, economic injustice and inequality, mass incarceration, police brutality, and an unequal education system (Alexander, 2020). A genuine commitment to equity by people who have benefitted from white privilege must recognize and come to terms with the centuries of violence, injustice, and white supremacy at the core of the history of the United States, and the continuing legacy of racism and oppression at the root of inequalities.

The discourses of decolonization emphasize that many of the taken-for-granted

elements of our educational system (testing, separate subjects, pacing calendars, grading, discipline policies, etc.) are designed to sift and sort students according to particular (and biased) versions of 'merit,' and the outcomes often fall along predictable lines of race, social class, ethnicity, language, ability, and gender. As people come to understand the unsustainability of the current economic model, they are beginning to connect the dots between the kind of education we have and an economy that is driving global warming, unprecedented ecological damage, and increasing inequality. Alternative models do exist — holistic, ecological, democratic pedagogies — that point us towards developing an educational system that is learner-centered, experiential, inclusive, just, equitable, joyful, and which aims to heal the wounds generated by centuries of colonization, racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and environmental plunder. These models can be said to be "decolonizing" (Kesson, 2019; Reyes, 2019).

e. Critical Place-based Education

Place-based education (PBE) is an idea that has begun to attain mainstream status along with the growing awareness that we have exceeded the carrying capacities of our planetary life-support systems and are in the midst of multiple extinction events and disruptions due to climate change. Conceptually, its aims and purposes include cultivating ecological awareness of the interconnectedness between human and "other-than-human" species, increasing young people's knowledge of their environments, getting students out into their communities to pursue authentic investigations that lead to engaged interdisciplinary learning, and fostering service and civic engagement.

The synthesis of critical pedagogy and place-based education is consistent with the aims of decolonization, in that it troubles colonial (settler) narratives, aims to incorporate principles of indigeneity into its conceptual framework (while being cautious to avoid cultural appropriation), and rejects the 'management' form of stewardship that is central to dominant environmental education. While PBE explores the laudable aims of re-inhabitation, it also needs to "identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization)" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 9).

If we in Vermont are to cultivate a truly sustainable economy and a place-based educational model that supports these efforts, the calendar and schedule of schooling will require reconceptualization. Including the summer months in the school calendar will foster health, well-being, outdoor education, and opportunities to learn survival skills necessary in these uncertain times, and could even mitigate the so-called "summer learning slide." vtlff.org/placebased-education

f. Epistemological Pluralism — Integrating Multiple 'Ways of Knowing'

Award-winning journalist Naomi Klein, political analyst and author of numerous books about the climate crisis, notes that we need to "articulate…an alternative worldview to rival the one at the heart of the ecological crisis" and that such an alternative worldview would need to be "…embedded in interdependence, rather than hyper-individualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy" (2014, p. 462). It is time to acknowledge that our educational policies and practices are steeped in a worldview that has outlived its usefulness, and which in fact is leading us to the brink of destruction. In the process of valuing a particular version of scientific investigation and reason over all other forms of knowledge construction, and guided by modern structuring metaphors of progress, expansion, growth, individualism, and hierarchy, ways of knowing that exist outside these contours have been marginalized or suppressed: embodied knowing, intuitional knowing, narrative knowing, traditional ecological knowledge, aesthetic knowing, mythic knowing, and ancestral and intergenerational knowing, to name a few.

An essential element of a decolonized education is deepening our understanding of Indigenous worldviews, ways of understanding the world that can help orient us towards the kind of thinking and being we need to cultivate if we are to survive and thrive in this new era. Only recently are people raised in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic) societies beginning to understand the wisdom encoded in more traditional, ecological, intergenerational ways of knowing that are embedded in the specificities of places. Often, these ways of knowing have been marginalized or altogether displaced as the knowledge/technology formations of global capital have subsumed the cultures and habitats that might point us toward more sustainable life patterns. This is not a call to romanticize Indigenous cultures, nor for people raised in WEIRD societies to adopt or appropriate Native cultural practices. People of Euro-centered backgrounds also come from ancestors rooted in specific places and grounded in Earth-centered wisdom; modernity is a relatively new phenomenon, and we all need to reconnect with our pre-capitalist lineages while recognizing that all cultures, modern and premodern, industrial and pre-industrial, Western and non-Western, colonial and colonized have their own unique inequalities and abuses. Our task is forward-looking: to cultivate epistemological pluralism, recognizing what is of value (and not) in multiple forms of cultural knowledge and applying these different ways of knowing appropriately in different circumstances and for different purposes.

g. Summary

The ideas presented above are not outside the mainstream of thought in Vermont. A recently conducted, informal poll of educators by Vermont Learning for the Future (vtlff.org) generated the following provocative "What happens?" questions about post-pandemic educational possibilities:

- What happens when we organize our schools around people, not topics, centering relationships, personal and community well-being as the focus of learning?
- What happens when we define education as pre-K through adult? How can we view schools as community centers in new and vibrant ways that add value to every community member regardless of age?
- What happens when equity literacy is as central as language, numerical, or scientific literacy?
- What happens when we dismantle age hierarchies and cultivate genuine youth/adult partnerships?
- What happens when we define schools as "anti-racist" not merely "inclusive?"
- What happens when schools actively decolonize our relationships to the natural world and each other, and when we redefine merit and success?
- What happens when we organize learning in multi-age/multi-ability bands, rather than being segregated by age?
- What happens when we organize teaching and learning in teams, supporting each other in interdisciplinary areas of inquiry and expertise?
- What happens when we tear up the timetable, supporting learning anywhere, anytime, anyplace?
- What happens when learners work at their own pace, investigating topics of personal, local, cultural, or global relevance?
- What happens when we replace "discipline and classroom management" with restorative practices?
- What happens when we provide frequent, authentic, and meaningful feedback through self-reflection, and from peers, educators, parents, and community partners?
- What happens when we let go of letter grades and grade point averages and fully embrace personalized, proficiency-based reporting?
- What happens when we intentionally balance digital technology with physical activity and connection to nature as integral parts of learning?

Many more questions will be posed by teachers, educational leaders, young people, families, and community members. Decisions about curriculum and what schools need to do to respond to the multiple crises we face must be community decisions. In the last sections, we outline some considerations as we move into the complicated conversations that must take place in order to make the urgent and necessary transition called for in these times.

PART V • SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Human society is constituted of interlocking, networked, and overlapping systems (education, health care, criminal justice and incarceration, food production and distribution, family systems, economic, and government hierarchies — local, state, national, global). The education system operates in multiple dimensions: material structures (school buildings), psychological frames (values and beliefs), professional preparation (colleges and universities, continuing education, professional associations), meetings (school boards, faculties, PTAs), and student experiences in and out of school, and is sustained by a powerful ideological apparatus (media, textbooks, curricula, policies, contracts, legislation). Some basics of systems theory:

- Systems generate habitual behaviors.
- In both mechanistic and organic systems, changes in one small part affect the whole.
- Changing any elements of complex systems can produce uncertain results.
- Most people (especially those who benefit from the status quo) prefer a level of stability and continuity.
- Change often signals a loss of privilege or status (for example when the talk turns to affirmative action, decentering whiteness, reparations, or repa-

triation of land), causing people to resist change and defend their perceived self-interests.

- Various strategies can lead to the same communal outcome — there is not one "right" way to create change.
- Systems change aims to bring about lasting change by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms which make the system operate in a particular way. These can include policies, routines, relationships, resources, power structures, culture, and values.

Decades of school reform in the United States framed as "systems change" (site-based management, various standards initiatives, high stakes testing, outcomes-based education, school-to-work, charter schools, and culturally relevant pedagogy) have produced little in the way of results. Educational funding debates rage, and efforts to devalue public education and redirect funding to privatized, charter, and for-profit schools abound, though the research shows that the majority (75%) of these schools are no better or worse than the public schools they seek to displace. What is lost is any semblance of public accountability. Educational outcomes and student experiences have proven over time to be resistant to significant improvement, given that issues of generational poverty, rural isolation, nutrition, immigrant status, racism, language difference, and inadequate health care are all powerful structuring elements that influence student outcomes. This suggests that efforts to "fix" schools in isolation from the larger social system are inadequate to the task of improving both learning and possible futures for all students.

Efforts to "fix" schools in isolation from the larger social system are inadequate to the task of improving both learning and possible futures for all students.

We are in an historical moment in which our choices are clear: we can attempt to return to 'normal,' (despite the fact that 'normal' was not working for many people) or we can embrace the complexity and uncertainty of a bolder, more comprehensive approach to transformative systems change. The climate crises, environmental collapse, species extinction, growing inequality, food and shelter insecurity, high levels of anxiety, depression, addiction, and despair in both young and old are calling forth our best efforts to transform not just the educational system, but the social, economic, and political infrastructure in which it is embedded. Such large scale change requires a whole systems approach, one that illuminates "societal interconnections, root causes, systemic barriers, key leverage points, and optimal solutions" (Dixon, 2020).

Systems change is a big idea that has elements of both top down and bottom up inputs. At the grassroots level of systems change is the community. The next section of this Blueprint deals with how to facilitate processes of engagement

that could support revitalized communities, strengthened democracies, and community centered schools. Building a "highly-engaged community" means developing ownership in a new view of learning that involves not just teachers, but also mentors, families, and community-based learning providers. Helping schools and communities build such models of community-engaged learning will take skilled leadership, the identification of new learning assets, and the cultivation of strong community partnerships, in addition to adequate funding, resources, time and support for continually strengthening the community's identity as a source of learning opportunities for young people.

A new paradigm of education policy is possible — one that promotes equity seeking school change and that **includes strategies to create conditions that will allow the educational improvements to take root, grow, and bear fruit in students' lives.**

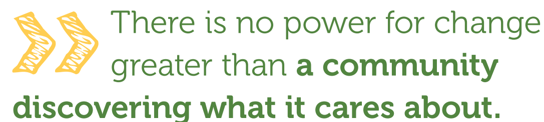
~ Jean Anyon, 2005

PART VI • COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is a strategy and approach designed to ensure that school change is done *with* the community, not *to* the community. The term can encompass everything from simple information sharing to consultation to active planning and participation. The Blueprint opts for the latter, with full understanding that bringing people into school change efforts is no simple matter given that many people are too busy surviving to participate in community affairs, feel marginalized or alienated from their own school experiences, assume that their children's education is best left to the professionals, or simply don't know how to enter into the work.

Redefining Leadership and Engagement

Local Vermont schools are governed by elected boards that are charged with engaging communities in visioning for their schools, financial oversight, policy and protocol adoption, and holding quasi-judicial hearings. These representative bodies will be crucial to the success of developing strong community schools. However, if this new model of school/community partnership is to flourish, processes of community engagement will need to expand beyond voting for a school board member.



There is no power for change greater than **a community discovering what it cares about.**

—Margaret Wheatley, "Turning to One Another," 2002

If our primary aim is to ensure schools and communities where all students and their families feel a sense of belonging and engagement, the process for getting there must feature broad community participation, with a diversity of income, race, gender, age, newcomer status, language, ability, etc. represented in all activities and reflected in the faces of leaders and decision-makers in schools and communities. Communities are often engaged in "fixing" problems, but seldom is the analysis of the problems-to-be-solved deep enough to bring about desired changes, nor do the strategic planning processes conscientiously

embrace complexity. Community participation must be valued, empowered and centered in reimagining schools, systems and policies, and youth leadership and full involvement needs to be at the heart of this. This is very different than traditional community engagement models which too often stay contained in public meetings with elected decision makers or a handful of open community meetings where input is distilled to a few bulleted recommendations. Vermont authors Clark and Teachout put it concisely: "Removing opportunities for citizens to sit on empowered boards, craft creative local solutions, and experience real, hands-on decision-making...is causing a **democracy deficit**" (2012, p. 110). Advancing this level of engagement is a daunting prospect in this time of intense polarization. Good leadership will require clarity, careful listening, empathy, skilled facilitation, and courage. There is no one best model of community engagement. We highlight a few highly effective approaches below:

a. Participatory Action Research

PAR involves researchers and community members in collaborative forms of inquiry working together to solve social problems. It is "context-specific" and focuses on social change that supports equality and stronger democracy. Its cycles of data-gathering, reflection, analysis, planning, and action help to create "learning communities" capable of taking increasing responsibility for their institutions and governance (Kirby & McKenna, 1989).

Communities are often engaged in "fixing" problems, but **seldom is the analysis of the problems-to-be-solved deep enough to bring about desired changes,** nor do the strategic planning processes conscientiously embrace complexity.

b. Critical Futures Research

CFR acknowledges that we are always in the process of creating our future, and is a method of moving debates about policy and planning beyond the superficial and obvious to the deeper meanings and causes of the problems under consideration. It provides opportunities to critically examine whose interests are represented in the current problematic situation, and unpack the ways in which privilege has operated to sustain the status quo. It is careful to attend to the inclusion of different ways of knowing among participants as a way of fostering social imagination (Inayatullah, 1999, 2017).

c. Participatory Budgeting

Without the 'power of the purse,' community engagement is merely symbolic. Participatory budgeting is a democratic process through which people decide how their public monies will be spent. It is a tested design process that involves brainstorming, proposal shaping, and ultimately, voting. Schools and districts are using participatory budgeting to engage students, families, and school staff in deciding how part of their school budgets will be spent. Young people are

learning the skills of civic participation — collaboration, public speaking, financial literacy, and problem-solving. While there are certain constraints on school spending, citizens can gain the power to decide whether to spend money on test packets or gardens, on arts programs or athletics. Participatory budgeting gives people real power over real money, laying an important foundation for increasing democratic decision-making over how public monies are spent.

d. Socially Engaged Art

Creativity is the new currency, say some futurists. And the cultivation of creative thinking that includes the engagement with multiple perspectives is absolutely central to the reconceptualization of our schools and communities. Artists trained in community change facilitation can provide outlets for collaborative reflection and community building, and foster divergent thinking, connection making, social imagination, experimentation, and an appreciation of complexity in the difficult work of social change.

Other models of engagement exist. Each community must decide on the processes and procedures that work best for them. The important considerations include:

- the analysis of existing conditions must be deep enough to critically address underlying structural and institutional issues
- participants need to fully engage their social imaginations and embrace complexity and uncertainty
- community members must have perceived and actual opportunities for meaningful input into decision-making
- those most impacted must have a seat at the table and be intentionally included when designing community engagement

Beyond these critical dispositions, some practical considerations will allow for a broader spectrum of engagement:

- Outreach to promote and invite people to participate via multiple communication methods
- Partnering with community organizations and leaders to identify comfortable, accessible, and welcoming meeting spaces
- Meeting times that work for working people and students
- Multiple meeting options: face-to-face, online, etc.
- Childcare when needed
- Remuneration (for time and transportation) when needed
- Provision of nourishing refreshments
- Translation and interpretation services (when applicable)
- Participatory and inclusive meeting practices

As long as community leadership is limited to those with professional expertise, flexible schedules, superfluous income, and leisure time, decisions will be made about people/without people.

One difficulty in community engaged social change lies in language use. Too often, assumptions are made about the meanings of words, which translate differently depending on a variety of cultural, experiential, social class and educational factors. This is true in homogeneous social groups as well as groups composed of people from differing linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Attention needs to be paid to cultivating shared understandings of important words like *transition*, *transformation*, *sustainability*, *equity*, *justice*, etc.

The current language-in-use of schooling is a technical language adopted from the corporate world, one governed by metaphors such as *accountability*, *outcomes*, *data management*, *value-added instruction*, *performance standards*, *learning management*, *and audit culture*. The buzzwords and tropes associated with this technical language find their way into policy, and have fooled us into thinking that the false sciences promoted by such mechanistic thinking equates to genuinely effective teaching and learning. If we wish to cultivate an educational environment of regeneration, empathy, connection, and deep learning, we need to use language that more thoughtfully represents the kind of world we hope to create. We should recall the instructive words of Audre Lorde:

> *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never allow us to bring about genuine change.* (2012, p. 112)

That the world is in a process of continuous change is not in question: it is the nature and direction of change that lends itself to human influence. If com-

munities can develop meaningful and sustainable forms of collaborative analysis, engagement and public problem-solving, we may avoid repeating the failed school 'reforms' of the past.

Identifying Learning Assets

Community asset mapping is a way to identify and categorize the learning resources in a community — to create educational *webs* that heighten the opportunities available for learning. These webs of learning empower individuals and communities to determine for themselves what skills and knowledge might best meet their needs for personal and social development, and distribute the tools for learning in an equitable way that maximizes the human potential for ingenuity and problem-solving. Community assets can include:

- Educational objects and places (art museums and galleries, theaters, nature centers, universities, commercial laboratories, science museums, planetariums, community gardens, maker's spaces, historical graveyards, parks, libraries, recreation centers, artist studios, memorials, forests, or wetlands)
- Non-profit organizations connected to such sites which offer formal and informal educational services
- Specialists in academic subjects (retired engineers, botanists, historians, etc.)
- Skilled community members (freelance entrepreneurs, master gardeners, herbalists, speakers of languages other than English, tradespeople, midwives, chefs, etc.)
- Community-based organizations based on ethnic, racial, gender, sexual or religious identity
- Socially responsible businesses
- Government agencies
- Senior and youth centers
- Volunteer/mutual aid organizations

Less tangible but crucial assets are the norms and values that the community holds: trust, reciprocity, belonging, respect for difference, respect for the land, spirit of volunteerism, cooperation, etc.

Community asset mapping can be carried out by personalized learning or community school coordinators, guidance counselors, teachers, school leaders, and/or community members. We have found that the most powerful mapping happens when youth take on leadership of the process. For one Vermont

student's experience with community asset mapping, follow this link: nextgen-learning.org/articles/reclaiming-education-through-community-partnerships

Community asset mapping is an ongoing project that must be flexible and adaptive to changing conditions. Outgrowths of mapping processes can include directories of people willing to mentor students, extended learning opportunities, peer-matching networks, and skill exchanges.

It is worth noting that the homeschooling and unschooling communities, including parent coops, constitute the largest (non-geographical) school district in Vermont. The number of home schoolers doubled during the pandemic and it remains to be seen what choices those families might make in the post-COVID future. With Act 77, students enrolled in public schools have many options to self-direct their own learning, including choosing mentors and teachers from the community. While some homeschooling families may not wish to cultivate connections to local schools, others might welcome opportunities to explore new relations and resource sharing. These families should be welcomed as important contributors to discussions about community development and schools.

Cultivating Partnerships

Partnerships are at the center of both conventional and transformative thinking about community schools, but historically school/community partnerships have not been inclusive of the many perspectives and interests in the community. To effect the transformation necessary to survive and thrive post-COVID, educators and school leaders must align with grassroots groups working for shared values of equity and sustainability: organizations working for peace, racial justice, Indigenous rights, democratization, regenerative agriculture, alternative economics, gender and sexual orientation justice, and more. For some people, this is a contentious topic — education, despite its historic alignment with the values and commitments of the dominant political/social/economic system, is assumed to be 'neutral.' We are not arguing here for an ideological curriculum, nor the indoctrination of students towards specific political ends, but rather for the cultivation of critical thinking, wide participation, and the objective analysis of our existing circumstances upon which to base innovation and creative problem-solving.

As we in Vermont rise to adapt to the uncertainty of the future and the rapid changes that are likely to be required (consider for example, the recent abrupt switch to online learning), community partnerships will be ever more essential. A variety of unanticipated needs and opportunities may arise: Negotiations for shared educational space or other resources, engagement of community-based service providers such as outdoor educators, recruitment of specialists to assist educators in developing new skills and additional technological expertise (every-

thing from media production to garden creation). We will need to develop innovative and effective ways to respond to ongoing food insecurity in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. We may wish to work with mutual aid organizations to train students to be “responders” to crisis situations. As we cultivate partnerships our aim should be to shift from more contractual/bureaucratic models to village models, in which we all share a concern for the ‘commons’ and understand the development of our youth as a widely shared responsibility. In this way, our *vital centers* might actually become *vitalized*.

PART VII • WHY VERMONT? WHY NOW?

Written for the global community, these words speak to the heart of what is possible in Vermont:

Localization is already happening. Without the help or approval from government and industry, a multitude of initiatives are quietly demonstrating the potential for localized systems to provide for our needs without borrowing from future generations. So far these grassroots projects have yet to be supported by public policy, a necessary condition for a real and lasting shift toward local. Our challenge is to replace a single, monolithic global economy with a kaleidoscope of vibrant local economies, which together redirect the extraordinary, even sacred, diversity of cultures and environments across the planet. Increasingly this will be an economics of survival, but it is also an economics of happiness.

~ Helena Norberg-Hodge, Founder and Director of Local Futures

What more could we hope for than to create a world of happiness, abundance, and well-being for the next generation of Vermonters? It is within our grasp to do the clear thinking and hard work to bring about such a world. Localization renews our connections – to one another, to our communities, to the living

world around us. It satisfies our yearning for purpose and belonging, and for a secure future for ourselves and our children. Strong local economies not only help ensure greater job security, prosperity and income equality, they also provide the framework needed to support strong communities, which in turn support the physical and psychological health of the individual. Healthy local economies = healthy communities = healthy schools = healthy people.

Our state has a strong tradition of local control of education, highlighted by the intense controversy since 2015 over Act 46, legislation designed to restructure the administration of schools through the consolidation of districts. It has been a confusing, contentious, and divisive process, and many people have worried that their cherished small schools will be closed. Vermont could be said to be redefining its educational identity, weighing the need to modernize small-town education to be responsive, equitable and reflective of the world today, while wishing to maintain its pastoral nature. Community schools could be the sweet spot in between the preservation of autonomy and tradition and the progressive movement for justice, equity, and concern for the collective welfare.

The United States is at an historic juncture in its development. Will Vermonters heed the call to become a truly multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious society that adheres to democratic values? Are we capable of forming "a more perfect union?" Can we, as Reverend Martin Luther King proposed, become a "beloved community," a society based on justice, equal opportunity and love for one's fellow humans? The call, in this Blueprint, for attention to decolonization and anti-racist education comes at a moment in which many white Vermonters have become aware of their histories as "settlers" on Abenaki soil, and of the ways in which Vermont has not always been a friendly place for its Indigenous population, people of color and new immigrants. Instances of racial profiling and harassment, disproportionate rates of incarceration of people of color, racist graffiti on public sites, and the realization of unequal impacts of COVID-19 have encouraged many Vermonters to become more involved in racial justice work, both in and out of schools. This document highlights the need to expand on this work and points in some directions for school leaders to explore.

Like everyone else in the world, Vermonters face a time of great uncertainty. We can look backward to the status quo, a past of fossil fuels, unrestrained economic growth, the pollution that comes with it, corporate control, and conflict over scarce resources, or forward to a future of abundant renewable energy, food sovereignty, economic democracy, ecological sustainability, and new, human scale models of living, learning, and working. We can build on the tradition of Town Meeting and local control in order to explore collective values and reset our priorities. We can become JEDIs, working for Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. We can explore innovative ways of engaging communities in

meeting the needs of the present and planning for the future. We can commit to making young people an essential part of this planning. We can decide that we wish for schools to be vibrant spaces where all young people want to be — spaces of equity, deep learning, relevance, empathy, relationship, sustainability, and joy. We can focus on the ethic of care in our schools rather than the ethic of competition. And we can resist the neoliberal call to continue to defund education and instead find new ways to fund what is most needed.

Can the adaptive changes we have experienced in the current crisis — working remotely, reduced travel, home food production — foster sustainable consumption and economic degrowth, moving us past dominant models of work and development? Have new opportunities opened up for mitigating climate change, protecting wild places, localizing economies, and taking action on other fronts? Have the educational disruptions we have all experienced opened up new possibilities for how we organize and structure the learning of our youth and of ourselves? Is our leadership and workforce prepared to deliver on these new possibilities?

We now have the opportunity to reconsider the fundamental purposes of education: rather than educate so that a tiny sliver of people rise to the top of the global income chain, we need to educate all people for the art of living well together on a fragile and sacred planet. We need to emphasize not just academic achievement and high test scores, but shift our focus to fostering compassion, community, empathy, imagination, insight, friendship, creativity, communication, justice, practicality, pleasure, courage, humor, wisdom, introspection, transcendence, ethics, service, solidarity, and the ability to live well within the carrying capacity of our ecosystems (Kesson, 2019).

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Author's note

A scholar/researcher can only write from a partial, limited perspective. I study and think from the standpoint of white skin and European heritage, a Cisgender female who has fluctuated between poverty and middle-classness over the course of a lifetime, a U.S. citizen, a teacher, a mother, a grandmother.

When I use the term "we" or "Vermonters" in this document, it is by no means meant to erase the very real differences that exist among us, nor to suggest a homogeneity of opinion, aspiration, or attitude.

My hope is that everyone who reads this can find some points of resonance, that it is possible in this time of extreme polarization to enact a "cultural Venn Diagram" in which we might discover shared values.

The Blueprint as written does not profess to be accessible or relevant to everyone. If the ideas resonate, it is up to others to interpret and share them in ways that seem useful. There is no "one model" of a community school — the great promise is that communities will define for themselves what they want from their school. That said, there are some non-negotiables. I believe that our community schools must strive for equity, and that they must promote the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will enable our young people to survive and thrive in an uncertain future.

Schools have always been in the business of constructing students to "fit" into existing society. In these extraordinary times, when the existing society is on a collision course with itself, it is no longer adequate to fit into society; students must be enabled and empowered to create the world they long for. I hope the Blueprint can contribute to the conversation about how we get from where we are to where we want (hope-yearn-envision-imagine-dream-aspire) to be.

About the Author

Kathleen Kesson, Ed.D., is Professor Emerita of Teaching, Learning and Leadership in the School of Education at the Brooklyn Campus of Long Island University (2002-2018). She is the former Director of Teacher Education at Goddard College (1992-2002), and was the founding Director of the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education at the University of Vermont, a research and policy organization (1997-2002). She has published numerous books, book chapters, and articles in peer reviewed journals around the themes of democracy and education, and has been researching the implementation of Act 77 in Vermont since 2013. She served on the Steering Committee for the creation of the Vermont State Curriculum Framework and the Science, Math and Technology Commission from 1993-1996, and completed a number of case studies on the implementation of the curriculum framework in Vermont schools. She also served on the task force to develop two sustainability standards for Vermont. She is currently a Global Affiliate with the GUND Institute for Environment at the University of Vermont, and is a contributing member of the Great Transition Initiative, a project of the Tellus Institute at Harvard University in Cambridge, MA.