

# Case Studies of Successful Practices

## Rural School Innovation Network

*A program of the Rural School and Community Trust*



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## North Berwick, Maine

### A High School Becomes the Community Center for Three Rural Communities

#### Introduction

In the fall of 2001, in North Berwick, ME, Noble High School students moved into a state-of-the-art school facility designed by educators and community members to be a community center for the three rural towns it serves. Because those towns are spread out over 134 miles, the school was built to fully integrate school and community functions with no defining line between student space and community space. Built through an integral community visioning process, the school is a true building at the center of community, providing shared space and a focal point while fulfilling community need.

#### Noble High School, North Berwick, Maine

Noble High School is part of a rural school district (Maine School Administrative District #60) in southwestern Maine, made up of the three towns: Berwick, North Berwick, and Lebanon, with a combined population of approximately 15,700. The towns are in Maine's first official county, York, which borders New Hampshire on its western side and the Atlantic coastline on its eastern side. First settled around the mid-1600's, the towns have a rich history in fur trading and pine sawmills.

Though the towns in SAD #60 are in between Portsmouth, New Hampshire and Kennebunkport, Maine, they do not share their relative affluence. Instead, they face high poverty levels and low adult educational attainment. The three communities have a median household income of approximately \$44,000, according to the 2002 Census.

The district serves 3,332 students; 1,096 of which attend Noble High School grades nine through twelve. Overall, 20.1% of students in the school are eligible for free/reduced lunch, and in the poorest town, Lebanon, 41% of the elementary students qualify. Many of the students come from multiple generations of families who have never watched a son or daughter march in a high school or college graduation: 86% of the population in Berwick, 83% in North Berwick, and 91% in Lebanon have not earned a college degree.

These working-class communities face serious economic challenges as the job base of the area shifts from industry to service, as demonstrated recently when the local tannery closed, laying off 500 local residents. The schools struggle to help students (and their parents) envision a life for themselves that reflects their potential, a life that may be very different from their parents.

The communities which Noble High School serves lack recreational and educational services—there are no theatres, public libraries, health centers, fitness facilities, or places for adult courses. Rural areas of Maine can be desperately lonely places for adults and youth. "A day's drive around our district would certainly convince anyone of the ubiquitous poverty, lack of community resources, and overwhelming need for educational and recreation programs for all ages," comments Pam Fisher, former Noble High School principal and driving force behind the building of a community school.

## Noble High School's Need

- ◇ Build a sense of community among three small, rural Maine towns
- ◇ Provide needed community services and lifelong learning opportunities
- ◇ Create a more personal, project-based interdisciplinary learning environment for students

In the fall of 1995, Noble High School faced both an opportunity and a dilemma. Many of the innovative learning practices they sought to implement were hampered by their facility built in the early 1960s with a capacity of 550 students: by 1995, Noble housed over 900 students, with the population rising by 50-100 students each year. Students attended classes in 14 trailers and hallways were nearly impassable. The three distinct communities served by the school lacked basic services, and sought ways to be engaged and involved in the school. A new school building was needed, to fulfill both the school's and the community's needs.

Before building and designing the new schools, a year-and-a-half-long comprehensive planning process took place, which involved gathering input from community stakeholders in the three towns. Public forums were held, the superintendent met with community members in local diners and private homes, surveys and questionnaires were gathered from students, teachers, parents, businesses, and community members. A planning committee representing different people in both the school and community was established. Based on a complex formula of needs and property valuation, the state school construction fund agreed that Noble was at the top of the list for new school funding.

The initial design of the high school was influenced by the Principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools (of which Noble High School is a member) and the district's Five Guiding Principles of Education:

- ◇ Abolish anonymity by creating small personal learning environments.
- ◇ Make spaces reflect the concept of teacher as coach; student as worker.
- ◇ Make sure the building supports a curriculum that is collaboratively designed, interdisciplinary, and project-based.
- ◇ Create a school that serves as a community center and embraces the community so that community functions are integrated with educational functions.
- ◇ Create a school that is flexible in design, materials, and function.

Noble teachers were clear about their vision for community use of the school for citizens of all ages: "We envision the school significantly broadening its services to the community. In our vision everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher..." stated the teachers on the planning committee.

## Noble High School Programs and Services that Meet Local Needs

*School Design Anticipates Community Involvement and School Need.* A number of design strategies make Noble High School a unique community school. A large main lobby designed to represent a "town square" makes the building feel more like a town center than just a school. It sets the tone for the rest of the school by making the community and the users of the building feel like they belong there. Students and community members gather and socialize in the town square.

"The design of our facility welcomes community members as well as our students. Parents that may not have particularly enjoyed their own high school experience have to notice a different feel to this school as soon as they walk through the front doors, one that is far more inviting than the one they remember," says Tom Ledue, Noble's Assistant Principal.

Though a relatively large structure, the school entry feels like a cozy living room, thanks to design features as well as the use of pictures and display cases dedicated to each of the three towns. The cases are maintained by the individual towns, and contain local information and news, and reflect their unique history and character. Connected to the town square

are “streets” leading out to small “education neighborhoods,” containing 15 academic learning communities, facilities for adult education, a Head Start and early childhood vocational program, a comprehensive health center, a culinary arts program that includes a 50-person restaurant run by students, the library/media center, a 1,000-seat performing arts theatre that features school productions and concerts as well as community events ranging from business meetings to a summer concert series, and the cafeteria—all facilities that are used by the community.

The 15 interdisciplinary student learning communities each house 100 students, four teachers, two classrooms, a science lab and a large multi-purpose room creating a personalized, small school environment.

**Comprehensive Health Center.** The mission of the Noble School Based Health Center is to foster wellness for all members of the SAD #60 school community. The Noble School Based Health Center provides all students with unrestricted health care that includes:

- ◇ Diagnosis and treatment of acute illness and/or injuries
- ◇ Chronic illness management, including diabetes and asthma
- ◇ Routine examinations including hearing, vision, and dental screenings
- ◇ Prescription services and laboratory testing
- ◇ Mental health services, including counseling
- ◇ High-risk-behavior education and services
- ◇ Nutrition counseling
- ◇ Sports physicals for a minimal \$10.00 fee
- ◇ Coordinated and complimentary health services with Primary Care Doctors

Through an agreement with the local York County Hospital, a family nurse practitioner is funded by the Hospital and available five days of the week at the Health Center. The clinic sees an average of 100-150 children a month. All services are free to children’s families. The nurse practitioner and two school nurses coordinate and triage services with York Hospital and primary care physicians. David Yarian, Health Center Medical Director and local physician who helped shape the direction of the Center, believes the program provides “continuity of care” for children in the county.

One of the challenges in funding the program is its dependence on the school budget for space and support staff. While York Hospital provides in-kind costs for the nurse practitioner’s salary and miscellaneous supplies, the school budget absorbs spiraling costs of maintenance, support staff and utilities. In an effort to sustain the program, the Center will begin to charge a minimal fee for some of the services.

**Performing Arts Center.** When it came time to consider building an auditorium, the school learned that the state of Maine would only fund a theatre with 500 seats. But since the three towns have no such facilities, they passed a referendum was passed to support 500 additional seats. The community facility includes a theatre, auditorium, stage with a fly gallery, and a small lecture hall. It has accommodated student and professional productions, town meetings, benefit concerts, films, dance recitals, and a summer concert series. Recently, a local state representative held monthly seminars for the community in the lecture hall. Students from the culinary program provided refreshments. A group of community members serve as an advisory for the Center. Rental and admission fees make the Center financially self-sustainable.

**Early Childhood and Head Start.** Two programs provide services to preschool children in the County. Facing space limitations and presented with the opportunity to provide services in the school, the Stanford Regional Vocational Program negotiated the placement of two programs at Noble High School: Early Childhood and the Head Start program. Children attend free of charge. Julie Cibley, the Director of the Center, also provides an early childhood education program to juniors and seniors. In addition to the Director, other staffing positions have been fulfilled by high school students who have participate through internships and work study in the two programs. Eight other towns send their preschoolers to the programs.

**Culinary Arts Program.** The school planning committee also negotiated with the Stanford Vocational Program to house their Culinary Arts program. The Culinary Arts program shares space and resources with the high school kitchen. Students enrolled in the two-year program have the opportunity to practice their trade while cooking for patrons eating at The Round Table. This 50-seat restaurant with its own entrance and location just off the school's town square allow community members easy access to the restaurant. It is open to the community during school hours. Again, this is a gathering place for community, students, and teachers.

**Adult Education.** The Adult Continuing Education Center offers an extensive continuing education program to both students and the community during the day and evening. A full-day childcare program is available to parents enrolled in classes. It is staffed by students in the early childhood program. Adult Education is able to offer classes utilizing state of the art classrooms.

**Ball Fields, Physical Fitness Facilities for the Communities.** Because the school sits on over one hundred acres of forested land, additional ball fields were added for the three communities. Community members are also welcome in the gym and athletic training facilities.

**Plans for the Future.** Several other possibilities exist for future use by the community:

- ◇ College courses offered on site by York County Community College
- ◇ A space for a business incubator program
- ◇ Health Center open to the entire community
- ◇ Expanded community use of the Library/Media Center

## Lessons Learned

Pam Fisher, former Noble principal and visionary, believes that education is a lifelong process which should be modeled and facilitated by the center of the community—the school. She offers the following advice from the Noble experience:

- ◇ Keep the school doors open. “To provide continuous programs for all ages, the school must be available every day, year-round.”
- ◇ Promote community connectedness. “The construction of a new school is an opportunity to bring the community closer together. Use the design process to encourage educational and cultural growth as lifelong pursuits.” Also, “The presence of community in school spaces creates opportunities for intergenerational learning and relationships.”
- ◇ Remember that design can make a difference. “The design of a school's space should serve the needs of the community as well as the learner, and find an architect that has an expanded vision of what a community school can be.”
- ◇ Nurture the planning process and ensure it is democratic. “Don't rush the planning process and be sure to involve a broad group of stakeholders.”
- ◇ And finally, “Don't compromise your vision!”

## Rewards and Awards

Since the doors opened, the building has received over 14 state and national awards for its design, including the Schools as Centers of Community: A National Search for Excellence from the KnowledgeWorks Foundation in 2004 and the National School Board Association Design Award in 2002.

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**School Demographic Information**

(2004-05; NCES Common Core of Data):

School Enrollment: 1,128  
Grades Served: 9-12  
Percent of Students Eligible  
for Free/Reduced Lunches: 20.1%  
Percent Students who are English  
Language Learners: .8%  
Percent of Student Population:  
American Indian/Alaskan Native: 0%  
Asian/Pacific Islander: .4%  
Black, not Hispanic: .5%  
Hispanic: .1%  
White, not Hispanic: 99.0%