

# A NEW ERA IN SERVICE LEARNING

The Rise of

Public Private

# School Partnerships

BY JACK CREEDEN

W

hen one scans the national horizon of independent/public school partnerships, one finds programs of all shapes and sizes. Some are organized by local foundations or nonprofit agencies. In other cases, mission statements and externally focused faculty drive the teaching and service components that focus students and curricula outward. While the program content may vary across schools and regions, the constant theme is to do more than organize book and coat drives and collect school supplies for the less fortunate peer groups. The most engaging partnerships strive, in the words of the Sage Hill School (California), to create “public purpose initiatives that exceed the reach and expectations of traditional community service.”

## Long-Term Service History

At no school is the partnership model more deeply embedded in mission and history than at Penn Charter School (Pennsylvania). Drawing on the principles of the Quaker religion, Overseers of this Philadelphia independent school in the 18th and 19th centuries were involved in helping organizations that served prisoners, the mentally ill, and the poor. Today, Penn Charter students in the seventh and tenth grades take a service-learning course, and electives such as “Issues in Physical Disability” help students confront their own preconceived notions of those who are less able-bodied.

As often happens in schools with service-learning components, Penn Charter students are in the Philadelphia community working with charter school students, revitalizing urban neighborhoods by creating gardens and flower beds, and serving as college-bound role models for younger kids in the public schools. Jim Ballangee, director of service learning at the school, identifies time set aside in the school’s calendar as critical to the success of Penn Charter’s efforts. Sending 500 students into the community is a logistical nightmare, but Ballangee sees little reduction in the traditional academic program as a result of the school’s community outreach.

Kellie Gilroy, the service learning coordinator at the public Wissahickon Charter School in Philadelphia, who works with faculty and students from Penn Charter, says of the partnership, “Our schools are in the same neighborhood and less than a mile apart. It’s great for our students to see such diversity in proximity. We’re all here together and together we can make a difference.”

Lick-Wilmerding High School (California) is the example many point to when looking to demonstrate how a single school can work in partnership with the community. Under the leadership of Head of School Al Adams, Lick’s Center for Civic Engagement was created in 1988 to implement the school’s public-purpose mission. More than 20 years later, the center sponsors

a host of programs that bring together students, faculty, and community partners. Students learn by doing, and by example demonstrate to schools and communities across the country how service-learning opportunities can bring value to all involved.

Park Day School (California), a K–8 school in Oakland, is another school with a long history of community partnerships. Director Tom Little and Community Outreach Coordinator Laurie Grossman both stress the importance of establishing long-term, trusting relationships based on mutual benefits. Little talks about the school’s very early conversations with local public school officials that were based simply on how schools could support one another if displaced by earthquakes or other natural disasters. All pledged to open their respective campuses to the community in an emergency. But this

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one conversation opened up important dialogue among Park School teachers and public school teachers. They began to meet with one another and found that conversations over students and curriculum helped “differences disintegrate.” Teachers shared strategies about literacy and bullying and soon began to offer jointly sponsored workshops on a variety of topics. The superintendent of the Oakland Public Schools was supportive of the collaboration, and soon other independent and public schools joined together. Grossman estimates that over 10,000 students have been touched by Park’s teacher workshops and partnerships, enrichment classes, book drives, and tutoring programs.

## Younger Schools, New Initiatives

But it is not just schools with long histories that are creating partnerships in the community. Sage Hill School, a high school in Newport Beach,

California, that was founded only 10 years ago, has had a public-purpose orientation since the school started. Service learning is embedded in the curriculum in all four years. As part of their “Scientific Inquiry” class, Sage Hill ninth graders help third graders in the local public school create and present science projects. The collaboration with the elementary school students is part of the grade for the class.

During the sophomore year, the focus is on literacy with a thematic emphasis on character. In class presentations to public school fourth graders, Sage Hill students use short stories, poetry, and excerpts from longer literary pieces to illustrate character values. They work together with the children to publish books the younger students have written. They also help the fourth graders write short stories or poetry.

In the 11th and 12th grades, Sage

Hill students have the option of creating their own independent projects with schools or working together with organizations in the community that have service projects linked to the Sage Hill curriculum. For example, in the “Multivariate Analysis” math class, part of the course requirement is to put on a math field day for middle school children. Sage Hill sponsors a “Service Learning Night” to celebrate the activities of the ninth and tenth graders, and each 11th and 12th grade student is required to do a presentation before a faculty committee on his or her independent study and describe the learning outcomes or shortcomings in the project. Jason Gregory, the director of community life and public purpose, believes that part of the success of the Sage Hill program is due to the determination of the founding faculty and early parents who did not want the students to only live in the bubble of Orange County, California.

Broad-based community participation and improving public school education were the goals in 2004 when the Baltimore Community Foundation brought together independent schools that had successfully launched partnerships. Rather than invent a new model, Tom Wilcox, the president of the foundation, asked representatives from a number of schools — including Lick-Wilmerding High School, Lakeside School (Washington), and the Park Day School — to come to Baltimore and describe their initiatives. As a result of those discussions, the Baltimore-based group launched a pilot program in the summer of 2005 with four independent schools and six public schools to create a five-week summer academic program for middle school students. Today, close to 500 students and 20 public and independent schools participate in the program year-round under the direction of the Middle Grades Partnership (MGP), a nonprofit organization. MPG focuses on improving the mathematics, writing, and reading skills of middle school students to prepare them for academically challenging high school admission. They use student interns as assistants and hire public and independent school faculty to direct the programs at local sites.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins' Bloomberg School of Public Health have recently completed a study of the effects of the program. Among other things, they found that MPG students improved their reading and math skills, were "five times more likely to qualify for competitive high schools compared to their Baltimore City middle school peers," and "attend classes during the school year more frequently." This is perhaps one of the earliest quantitative evaluations of a public/private school partnership.

Now in its 10th year, Prep at Pingree was started in response to an accreditation report that challenged the Pingree School (Massachusetts) to act on its "commitment to diversity." With support from the board of trustees, the school's administrative leadership reached out to public schools, the YMCA, local churches, and Boys and

Girls Clubs in the struggling cities of Lawrence and Lynn, Massachusetts, to find "students who have successfully completed the seventh and eighth grades who want to sharpen their math, verbal, analytical, and study skills." Experienced public and independent school faculty, Prep at Pingree alumni, and Pingree students are the instructional staff, teaching assistants, and student counselors in a five-week summer program and supplementary year-round support system designed to not only improve academic skills, but also to "break down cultural and social boundaries and build understanding among young people from disparate backgrounds."

The first group of Prep at Pingree students will graduate from college this spring, a measure of success no one fully expected a decade ago. Director Steve Filosa describes the collaboration and collegiality among public and independent school faculty as unique. "No one is reluctant to share curricular information or teaching methodologies. There is no territorial nature to these conversations," he notes.

### Support from Nonprofit Organizations

As individual schools or coalitions of schools have become involved in partnerships, a collection of nonprofit organizations has sprung up to help promote and sustain collaboration. Aim High, which was begun 25 years ago by two Lick-Wilmerding teachers who wanted to give "urban middle school students a summer of high quality learning in an environment that promoted education as a way to unlock the future," now has more than 1,000 students and 250 teachers on campuses in San Francisco, Oakland, Marin County, and San Mateo County. Master teachers, teachers at the beginning of their careers, college interns, and high school teaching assistants from charter, independent, and public schools come together with college-level partners and philanthropic organizations to serve the needs of current students.

Based in Boston, The Steppingstone Foundation was started in

## Links to Schools and Organizations with Public-Purpose Initiatives

Baltimore Community Foundation  
[www.bcf.org](http://www.bcf.org)

Lick-Wilmerding High School  
[www.lwhs.org](http://www.lwhs.org)

Middle Grades Partnerships  
[www.middlegradespartnership.org](http://www.middlegradespartnership.org)

National Partnership for Educational Access  
[www.educational-access.org](http://www.educational-access.org)

Park Day School  
[www.parkdayschool.org](http://www.parkdayschool.org)

Penn Charter School  
[www.penncharter.com](http://www.penncharter.com)

Prep@Pingree  
[www.pingree.org](http://www.pingree.org)

Sage Hill School  
[www.sagehillschool.org](http://www.sagehillschool.org)

The Stepping Stone Foundation  
[www.tsf.org](http://www.tsf.org)

Wingspan Partnerships  
[www.wingspanpartnerships.org](http://www.wingspanpartnerships.org)

1990 as a nonprofit organization that "develops and implements programs which prepare urban school children for educational opportunities that lead to college success." The foundation created the National Partnership for Educational Access (NPEA) in 2007 as a membership organization for educational organizations "committed to increasing educational access for motivated underserved students across the United States." NPEA provides independent schools, colleges, universities, and scores of nonprofit organizations with "professional development, information sharing opportunities, data analysis, and dissemination of best practices" designed to support a collaborative learning environment.

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, David Drinkwater and Jacqueline Smethurst, both experienced heads of schools, founded Wingspan Part-

nerships, a nonprofit organization designed to expand the model of public/private school collaboration in order to increase community impact. What they witnessed in New Orleans when the public schools were declared closed for a year convinced them of the need “to support independent schools in leveraging resources to benefit underserved public school students.”

Today, Wingspan Partnerships works with public and independent schools to encourage “authentic partnerships” that bring together teachers, students, administrative leaders, trustees, and others in schools and communities to deepen the meaning of teaching and learning in schools. Wingspan believes that the impact on the community is strengthened through collaborative efforts, and that independent schools “can invigorate their service programs and extend their commitment to diversity and community engagement” beyond traditional community service (see article on page 40).

### The Assessment Challenge

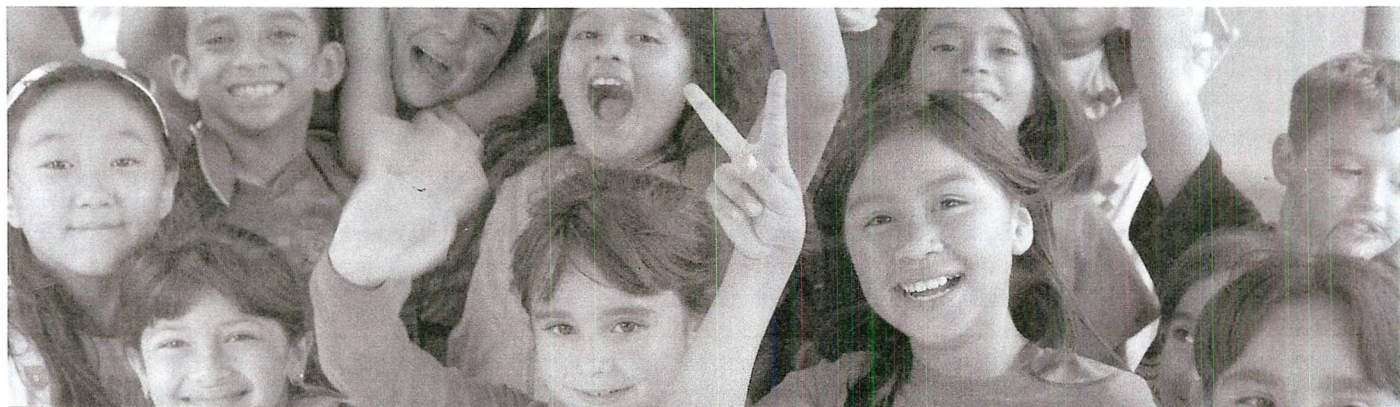
There are multiple challenges ahead for all schools engaged in partnerships. The directors of programs across the country all stressed the importance of long-term, lasting relationships between and among administrative leaders, teachers, and most especially students. The preconceived notions both sides share are almost always diminished once people start talking to one another and identifying common problems and solutions.

Anyone who has ever worked in a school appreciates the scheduling challenges community partnerships present. But based on the directors with whom I spoke, there was a growing awareness on the part of faculty, students, and especially parents of the value partnerships create for public and private schools, their students, faculties, and communities. Even among the more traditional independent school faculty concerned about covering the material, public-purpose time in the schedule, not time out of the

schedule, was seen as contributing to the educational purpose of the school.

How schools measure the impact of increased partnerships remains a major question. There appears to be plenty of anecdotal information, collected from all who participate, that people and perceptions are changed, and communities improved when public and private schools work together. That level of documentation, however, is increasingly suspect as demand for limited resources pressures donors, foundations, and public and independent school budgets. Even the Johns Hopkins study referred to earlier struggled with linking certain changes in students with participation in the Middle Grades Partnership program. As we all look to the future, perhaps that is the next greatest challenge.

*Jack Creeden has served as headmaster at two schools, Fountain Valley School of Colorado (Colorado) and Providence Day School (North Carolina). He is the vice chair of the NAIS Board of Trustees and serves as a member of the National Commission on Accreditation.*



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