



And Now a Few Words with the Author...

An interview with Peggy Silva by Deborah Bambino

This spring Peggy Silva and Robert Mackin published *Standards of Mind and Heart: Creating the Good High School*, their account of the planning and birth of their school, Souhegan High, in Amherst, NH. Read on to learn what Peggy had to say about her work in a recent interview with Debbie Bambino.

Tell us a little about your background and your current work.

I'm a charter member of Souhegan High School and a member of the planning team. I'm a long-time member of the Coalition of Essential Schools and have presented workshops at a number of Fall Forums. I'm a coach and national facilitator of the National School Reform Faculty and I am a charter member of Educational Writers for Change. This year I will be responsible for designing and facilitating a Writer's Workshop at Souhegan, as well as supervising our graduate interns for the University of New Hampshire.

Your book says it's the story of a school, but that more than anything it is a story about democracy. Can you elaborate?

High schools are among the least democratic organizations in our society. Bob Mackin, our first principal, consistently prioritized our need to honor democracy in our daily practices and program. The pressure to act efficiently, quickly, etc. often reared its head in our day-to-day work. Democracy is messy, not neat, and sometimes it can be painfully slow. As our population has grown, the challenge of democratic practice has grown too.

I loved the quote about "a clean stall was the sign of a dead horse." How does this quote relate to the change and growth process at Souhegan?

Dan, one of our teachers, said that, and he also said that anything worth doing is worth doing poorly. These

words reflect the heart of our work as teachers modeling the reflective growth process. We take risks, we make mistakes and we talk about them. We recognized early on that mistakes were necessary if we were going to reach good products.

There's a lot of discussion about your "mission" in the book. Can you describe the inception and ongoing life of your mission statement in the school?

Two volunteers came together to work on the planning of our school. After a lengthy period of working on every word and syllable of our mission, we knew we had an opportunity, really a luxury, of getting school right. We asked ourselves what we held sacred and once we agreed to it, we etched it in calligraphy on the school's entrance. All incoming ninth graders spend the first three days of school unpacking the mission and making it their own.

We hold our collective feet to the fire by consistently asking the question of all programs and activities, "Does it reinforce our mission? How or how not?" On those occasions when we neglect this focus, we find ourselves drifting from our true, authentic purpose.

How did you develop the "Souhegan Six" norms?

One of the planning team members, Cleve, worked on this process with students. He was determined to come up with rules that reflected our philosophy, not the usual list of "Thou shalt nots" that we often find in our schools and districts. He basically put it to the kids by saying, "This is how we want the school to be, so what rules do we need?"

Now that the norms are in place, new students use them as text in text-based conversations as part of their orientation to our learning community.

What's the role of voice in your school?

It goes back to what I said about democracy being messy and time-

consuming. We need to hear and honor all voices. We worry about voice all the time and we have been moved to try new structures and models as we

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Souhegan High Mission Statement

Souhegan High School aspires to be a community of learners born of respect, trust and courage. We consciously commit ourselves:

- To support and engage an individual's unique gifts, passions and intentions.
- To develop and empower the mind, body and heart.
- To challenge and expand the comfortable limits of thought, tolerance and performance.
- To inspire and honor the active stewardship of family, nation and globe.

Souhegan Six

- Respect and encourage the right to teach and the right to learn at all times.
- Be actively engaged in the learning; ask questions, collaborate and seek solutions.
- Be on time to fulfill your daily commitments.
- Be appropriate; demonstrate behavior that is considerate of the community, the campus and yourself.
- Be truthful; communicate honestly.
- Be responsible and accountable for your choices.



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have grown.

Our current principal, Ted Hall asks the question, “What happens to voice when you get big?” We are currently moving to a small learning community structure so that community meetings will be small enough to allow for the thinking, rethinking and messy thinking that ensures all voices are heard.

How are students grouped at your school?

Our classes are heterogeneous and inclusive. We believe that heterogeneity is both authentic and rigorous. Having said that, we mobilize the material and staff needed to support the training of a diverse group of learners. Our organization teaches students the art and craft of self-advocacy.

One clear example of our support for heterogeneity is our teacher to student ratio. None of us teaches more than eighty students. If I did teach more than eighty kids, we’d read less, write less, etc. In smaller classes I can encourage everyone’s voice, everyone’s potential to publish. In a large class I would encourage Jennifer, but I wouldn’t be able to give Kathleen the extra support she needed to experience success.

What assessments do you use at Souhegan?

All tenth graders take the state

tests and we’re required to meet all the state benchmarks, but New Hampshire doesn’t have a large state bureaucracy and the tests aren’t our only measure of student achievement. We honor testing as one form of data. We’ve been working with the University of Wisconsin on multiple forms of assessment. However, the best measure of our students is our ability to know them well and mobilize the structures and resources they need to meet the standards and experience success. The proof is in our students’ willingness to stick around and graduate. They decide to finish both their course work and their exit projects even though it sometimes means working through the summer and graduating in August.

About a half dozen of our students have needed extra time and taken it.

Describe your advisory program.

At Souhegan we are committed to holistic education and our advisory program plays a strong role in our personalized approach to our students. “We believe that the presence of caring adults in students’ lives leads to their greater success.” Our advisories meet every day and are made up of ten to twelve students and an advisor. The advisor acts as an advocate and primary contact person at the school for all four of the student’s years with us. Our mission states that we’re

going to “challenge and expand the comfortable limits of thought, tolerance and performance.” At Souhegan we want our students to use their “minds and hearts” well both in and out of school. Advisory provides one critical context for the implementation of our mission.

Tell us about your greatest hope and your greatest fear in this next period.

Actually, they’re the same thing. I’m concerned with our rapid growth and while I’m hopeful about our ability to grow and restructure, I’m afraid at the same time. We won’t have the luxury of a grace period for reflection and planning this time. This time, school is in session and we’ll be meeting at the end of the day. I wonder how we’ll take the time for storytelling, how we’ll make space for all our voices after teaching 1000 kids all day. I hope we haven’t exceeded our capacity to honor what we hold sacred.

Anything else you’d like to tell our readers?

I’d like everyone who reads the book to know that it’s really the product of sixty-five teachers and thirty-five students who all read drafts, weighed in, and added their voices to the finished product. ❖

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Creating a Community of Learners...

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Plymouth State College who is part of two RP groups at her college, praised the RP process. “The hour that I spend in my RP group is one of the most productive of my whole week. After 10 years here at Plymouth, I have learned to stay away from those activities that sap my energy...RP re-energizes me. Not only do I see tangible results in my students’ work, but participation in these groups has changed the way I think about my teaching.” Reflective practice has the potential to improve instruction, increase col-

laboration among faculty, and promote great success among the increasingly diverse students enrolled in college today.

Reflection and collaboration help unlock the mysteries of teaching and learning whether your students are in kindergarten or the first year of college. ❖

The authors coordinate the “Equity and Excellence in Higher Education Project”. For more information about the project, visit their website—

<http://iod.unh.edu/EE>.

References

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