

NSRF's Living History: An Interview with Margaret MacLean

Peggy Silva, New Hampshire

How did a British woman come to work for the Rural School and Community Trust in northern Vermont?

Eventually, all paths converge. With experience in British schools, international schools in Russia, Bulgaria, Germany, Holland and Poland and now rural schools in Vermont, I have been able to use elements from each of my experiences in very diverse settings. My first teaching position was in a school in Leicestershire, England, the school that developed the open classroom, and started the first integrated day structure. Although it was scary and new for a first year teacher, it was also exciting – an extremely collegial experience of working with four other teachers to plan a cohesive program for 10-12-year-old students.

After years of traveling and working in Europe, my husband, daughter and I settled in Peacham, Vermont, a small community of 640 people. I accepted a position as a principal in a pre K-6 setting. Peacham is a supportive community, and both the community and our school were going through a very difficult time. It was an interesting time to become a school leader – our problems mandated innovative solutions.



Margaret MacLean

How did you discover the National School Reform Faculty?

My school became involved with the Annenberg Rural Challenge, which later evolved into the Rural School and Community Trust (rural-educ.org), and I became a founder of the Vermont Rural Partnership, VRP (vermontruralpartnership.org), a coalition of 18 small rural schools, which has just ended its 10th year. Our work with the Rural Trust involved a portfolio project, which had a Harvard-based design team with Vito Perrone, and I found this particularly interesting. In 2001, I accepted a part-time job for the Rural School and Community Trust with an assessment focus. Around the same time Faith Dunne, one of the first directors of NSRF, moved back to Vermont and we connected our work. I attended a five-day seminar and began the work of establishing CFGs at my school. Later I interned with Faith in Vermont. After Faith's untimely death, a small group of folks in Vermont gathered to figure out how we could continue Faith's work in Vermont and VTNSRF was born (vtnsrf.org).

Much of the work I currently do is crossover work between the two organizations, the Rural School and Community Trust and NSRF.

Faith Dunne helped me to recognize that all the elements of my diverse experience in settings around the world could work together. She helped me to blend my experiences together in collaborative, non-hierarchical ways.

What does equity work look like in rural Vermont?

There are a number of issues associated with educational inequity in Vermont. School finance is an equity issue here, and even though Vermont has a reasonable education finance law, Act 60, there are still disparities between towns with tourist wealth and those without the former which plays out in create schools with many opportunities and resources, while the latter communities struggle to pass adequate school budgets. Beyond school financing issues we have many students who live in poverty and issues of equity arise around readiness for school, those with access to Pre School and those without etc.

As a principal I was always trying to explain to parents who wanted the "perfect" school experience for their child how much we learn and grow when things are not perfect – how growth comes through dissonance and challenge.

What is difficult for those of us working in this setting is that many of our families have a strong history of generations working in farming and logging, typical rural occupations, but those jobs are disappearing and changing at a rapid rate and there is an urgent need to change the direction of our educational goals. It is often difficult to help traditional rural high schools to recognize that the demands of a global economy mandate the need to change teaching practices and learning goals. Regardless of all the applicable filters—socioeconomics, gender, and race—there is not an expectation that all students can learn. And that is the heart of equity work, regardless of setting.

Most of my colleagues in the Rural Trust, a virtual organization spread across the country, are African-American women from the south. We have a true alliance because our values are grounded (continued on page 12)

in the same place. I have such respect for their journeys as educators and their passion for their work with students. I have experienced a huge learning curve—partially because of my personal background as a citizen of Great Britain, but the discourse on equity with them has taught me so much. I feel such a sense of urgency about it.”

Describe your Center of Activity.

In Vermont our Center works strategically within our state and our mission is to have an impact over time on the way all Vermont Schools do business. There are currently seven national facilitators who are members of the Vermont Center; we are a collaborative group spread out across the state who meet regularly as a center. We have forged some essential agreements, and we share the work and match the facilitators to the work. We believe that our collaboration can over time provide a big impact in a small state. Vermont now has more than 500 trained coaches. We also provide ongoing coaching, and that has made a substantial difference in our work as we struggle with issues beyond initial implementation, issues of school improvement, reform and equity.

What are your hopes and fears for NSRF as it moves forward?

Over the past several years I have had a number of fears about the evolution of NSRF. The Rural Trust is, like NSRF, an organization originally developed through the philanthropy of the Annenberg Foundation so I am able to contrast their development. NSRF has huge strengths, which have resulted from the collaborative and open way the NSRF movement has grown. We need to harness these strengths of collaboration, openness and transparency and mirror them in our governance structure. Currently we have a very traditional closed national structure, which does not take advantage of the power of the NSRF movement in the field. I believe we can create a vital and inclusive governance model, which would better serve the development and impact of NSRF work. My hope is that we will embrace this challenge. I also believe that equity is the heart of our work and NSRF needs to embrace the issues equity work has revealed to us.

What excites you about your current work?

My work with the Rural Trust is varied and takes me around the country to small rural places, which I find fascinating and interesting as well as often chal-

lenging. I have learnt so much particularly about the south from visiting and working in these small communities. I feel like I am bringing an outside perspective to these places, one of hope and possibility for improving their schools and communities. The heart of the work of the Rural Trust is to help schools and communities get better together and Place Based Learning is a central strategy to this goal. I have been able to support teachers working with community members to develop exciting community based projects, which meet curriculum requirements and add value to their communities. One project I am currently working on for the Rural Trust is Fund for Teachers. (fundforteachers.org) This project provides grants of \$5,000 to teachers, to explore a passion during the summer months. Currently we have teachers traveling as far away as South Africa and New Zealand to learn about topics they will bring back to their classrooms next year.

With VTNSRF I am currently coaching 2 schools one a small K–8 school which has made great progress with our work and the other a large rural high school which is just beginning. I am enjoying the challenge of thinking through the issues the large high school is struggling with.

I just had the opportunity to work with Daniel Baron in an institute on building sustainable communities with Peter Senge through his Society for Organizational Learning (SOL). Shelburne Farms and the Burlington, Vermont schools are partners in this work and Daniel and I led learning journeys into the community

It was fascinating to see that Senge's personal style in planning an institute. He is personally comfortable in a lecture hall setting, rather than in a collaborative model. That gave me a lot to think about.

I am about to attend a CFEE Coaching for Educational Equity seminar at Bayces in Oakland, California. I believe that this experience will add to my knowledge base on issues of equity in education and enrich my thinking.

Since 2004 I have also been bringing NSRF work overseas to international school settings and I have had the opportunity to work with schools in Japan, Korea, Thailand and China. In October I will be traveling to Africa to introduce NSRF work at two conferences for international schools, one in Swaziland and the other in Uganda. ■

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