

**Vision:** Each young person in Burlington and Winooski, Vermont will graduate from high school with the confidence, enthusiasm, skills, and knowledge to build a satisfying and sustainable future for themselves, their community, and their world.

**Mission:** We will transform Burlington and Winooski School Districts by establishing a student-centered learning system that enables each learner - especially New American and historically marginalized learners - to develop the skills, knowledge, and relationships necessary to become confident, motivated, and self-sufficient learners who are successful in college and careers and are engaged in their communities. We will draw upon the collective wisdom, courage, and compassion of learners, teachers, families, and community partners in supporting *every* learner to pursue excellence.

## EVOLVING VISION

*“Too often we try to persuade kids that this is all just getting ready for something else, preparation for the next thing. But really they are whole people here and now. And learning is fundamental to our humanity. Everyone deserves a soulful, human and just opportunity to learn in our society.” – A Parent<sup>i</sup>*

Over the past year, conversations about transforming learning in Burlington and Winooski, Vermont have been inspired by many things. Research, videos, stories, articles and, most importantly, people have all played an essential role in how we’ve shaped our vision.

We share here where the process started, where we’ve taken it in the past year, and how it will carry learners, our schools and our communities into a future where *every* learner graduates from high school with a productive path forward in life.

### **Beginning at the Beginning: Understanding Where We Are and Where We Want To Be**

This change process began, predictably, well *inside* the traditional mechanism of public education.<sup>ii</sup>

The Burlington and Winooski School Districts as a whole, and High Schools in particular, have been on a path toward greater student-centered learning for some time. Inherent in this process has been a clear articulation of goals for student learning and an assessment of current learning in light of those goals.<sup>iii</sup> Both high schools underwent a thorough audit, conducted large-scale student and parent surveys, implemented teacher study groups, and engaged administrative coaches to support this pursuit of a new vision for learning.

Around the time when Nellie Mae was preparing to issue its RFP for this initiative, a few things were becoming clear from these self-assessments:

1. Our schools and communities have a tremendous amount to be proud of. Every day there are great examples of high-quality student-centered learning and positive student outcomes.
2. We are not where we want to be. In general, school does not feel like a fit for who learners are, what employers need, or where the world is going. Some of the best examples of great teaching and learning happen in spite of system constraints.
3. The path to where we want to be – to where we know we must be – is fragile and perilous. It crumbles under the weight of the system that *is* and that has always been.

The opportunity and the charge set by Nellie Mae helped us identify and come to grips with an essential fourth bullet to add to that list:

4. The habits, practices, and cultures that are embedded in the system do not have the capacity to shift that system. **A new kind of collaborative work is required to help us move from where we are to where we need to be.**

Our work over the past year has focused keenly on this fourth bullet. We’ve made dogged, important progress in building trust and collaborative will across a non-traditional partnership, in learning how to authentically engage stakeholders, and in developing the capacity for great change.

Our summative achievement: A great deal of work has been done in the past year that, while difficult and messy at times, has coalesced in a plan that we ultimately feel is worthy of the opportunity set to us and of the people it will engage. A process that began in a familiar place with familiar voices and strategies has found new, shared ground and a new set of structures that speak to the values, courage, and dramatic change that our communities demand.

The path forward from here is anything but concrete. Effectively quashing our anxiety, though, is confidence that the strategies and budget laid out here deliver on the ideals and passions we've heard from learners, educators, parents, and community members. The road itself may still be under construction, but the values are bedrock.

### **Higher Level Partnership and a New Conversation: Getting to Inside-Outside**

Our schools and project team began this year with a clear understanding of what research tells us about high-quality student-centered learning.<sup>iv</sup> Our cadre includes experts in secondary public education, community-based learning, teacher learning, labor relations, and higher education who have been creating personalized opportunities for learners in our schools for some time.<sup>v</sup> Nellie Mae's definition of SCL is very much in line with the functional definitions held by these and other local practitioners.

To us at least, there was nothing particularly revolutionary in the concept of "Student-Centered Learning". What *was* revolutionary was talking about SCL at scale. The leap from pilots, examples, and pockets to ubiquity is an enormous one, as is the task of grounding change at a cultural level.

Formal partnership between the Burlington and Winooski School Districts was a decisive first step in putting the needs of people ahead of the comfortably rigid structures of traditional education. Experience and research, however, show school-based structural alignment to be inadequate to effecting real change without simultaneous engagement of and partnership with families and the community.<sup>vi</sup> Transformation requires that understanding, trust, and will be built *both* within and beyond school walls.

To guide work in and between those two crucial spheres, we adopted an **Inside-Outside Change Strategy**. The "inside" piece is work that supports family and community engagement by developing capacity, structures and leadership in school-based settings, while the "outside" piece lives in non-school settings. If successfully done, the outcome of this work will be a busy, lasting, jointly maintained bridge.

The Lead Community Partner application from Voices for Vermont's Children describes progress and plans for "outside" family and community engagement work. The "inside" piece resides in this document.

### **Applying Vision to Methodology**

A great deal of work has gone into determining transformation goals, activities, and priorities that are right for our communities. We connect what the research tells us with what the actual people in our schools and communities think and feel.

To do this, we established a fundamental ground rule early on in the design work of this project, dictating that every element in our plan *must* be supported by two things: 1) **Research** and 2) **Local Voice**. Any element that can't be undergirded by specific citations in both categories cannot be written into the plan.

*Example*: A major breakthrough in the development of our Logic Model draft came when we employed a software tool that allowed us literally to write the backstory behind each box in the model. What did the research tell us about this strategy? What did our local experience, context and voice tell us? How did those two things come together to form our direction? This approach gave our Logic Model depth and voice, elevating it from a stock description of SCL and clinical school transformation to a map for *our* communities showing how we can move forward together to create a personalized, effective experience for every learner.

We've worked hard to engrain this perspective in everything we've done. You will read about many of the specific examples of how experience and local context have shaped our work in greater detail as you move forward through this document. The core examples include:

- Ineffective teacher engagement sinks school-based change efforts on both a buy-in and content level. Our districts have experienced the painful lessons that come when teachers don’t perceive legitimate leadership roles for themselves or their representatives. It’s also impossible to evolve student learning without simultaneously evolving educator roles, supports and professional learning opportunities.
- A clear understanding of what research says about best practices in student learning tells you nothing about what individuals in your community think, envision and value. The only way to get at that crucial perspective is through time, legwork and honest listening. Despite much effort and good intention, our schools and communities have to this point lacked the systemic capacity to support essential relationships with stakeholders at multiple levels.
- If communities value change in education, they cannot expect schools to accomplish that change on their own, nor can they allow schools to pursue change in isolation. We’ve been through countless experiences that underscore this point. It goes to our base belief that learning is a community enterprise, and that our system does not have the ability to change itself on its own.

**Our Vision for a New System**

Our Inside-Outside Strategy, dual focus on research and voice, and heartfelt ambitions for *each* learner in our communities, culminate in the following changes to our educational system:

<i>New System</i>	<i>Existing System</i>
Youth play an active role in shaping their personal educational path, experience and opportunities; school-wide use of Personalized Learning Plans	Needs of learners often subordinate to the needs of a system based on standardized times, settings and curriculum
System requires and accomplishes learning that is personalized, engaging, student-centered, technology-rich and configured along multiple pathways and opportunities (policy-supported)	Learning is arranged and credited in school between the hours of 8-3; personalization occurs despite, not because of the system; inadequate and inequitable technology access
District policy drives proficiency-based learning, assessment, and graduation	Credit-based learning; seat time
Policy-based proficiency, personalization, increased school- and community-based supports, and cohort-level assessment improve outcomes for all of our most vulnerable learners	Inadequate supports for low-income and New American learners; lack of effective integration of strategies to improve outcomes; significant family concerns about proficiency
Interdisciplinary & thematic learning in new student cohort systems; teachers as facilitators	Subject-based learning; predetermined curriculum; textbook-based teaching
Pre- and post-secondary transitions support positive student outcomes; policy-based alignment ensures learners have the skills, relationships and pathways they need to succeed	Significant disconnects between middle and high school; inadequate embedded community-based learning opportunities; inequitable access to post-secondary preparation and planning
Teachers are supported as professionals with opportunity for growth and leadership	“Teaching is a job, not a profession ... We are seen as cogs in a machine.” <sup>vii</sup>
Families are active partners in shaping school transformation and personalized learning	Families insufficiently and ineffectively invited to participate in learning
Infrastructure, policies and visionary learning support transformation that formally integrates learners, educators, families, and community	Schools working in isolation; patterns of negative school/family interactions; insufficient pathways & overt obstacles to school/community partnerships

This bold vision forced us to create a new structure to support and implement its ideals. We will establish a Transformation Academy, based on Participatory Action Research and supported by a network of Fellows, Implementation Teams, and a diverse Steering Committee (details follow).

**Improving Outcomes for Our Most Vulnerable Learners**

One of our key research assumptions is that the needs and outcomes of our most vulnerable learners are a bellwether of effective personalization for *all* learners, and should inform the design, implementation, and evaluation of broad-based strategies.<sup>viii</sup>

Our plans here, as everywhere, are tied directly to research and local voice.<sup>ix</sup> The strategy is not merely about providing additional supports for marginalized students to succeed within the confines of the *current* system. It's about creating the powerful learning experiences that prepare every student for a successful future, and that incorporate and *rely* on mastery of the core skills.

Focusing on the substantial and unique needs of New American and low-income learners, we will:

- Support learners in working toward clear, relevant proficiencies identified in co-developed Personal Learning Plans; coordinate learning inside and outside of school settings to increase learning time; and create new opportunities for learners to achieve, demonstrate, and celebrate proficiency.
- Increase learner engagement by ensuring that *every* student has access to technology that supports creativity, flexibility, efficiency, and effectiveness in learning.
- Eliminate the barriers that currently segregate school- and community-based learning; specifically target learning in alternate settings where students and families already spend time and have relationships; engage adults whom students trust in the community to support, manage, and mentor learner progress on Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs).
- Build relationships with underserved learners, families, and community leaders to cultivate understanding, trust, and a shared responsibility for learner outcomes; build capacity inside the system and among community partners to support these relationships in the long-term.<sup>x</sup>

Substantial additional time and resources are required to meet the needs of marginalized learners. We recognize that not all of that time and resources can or should come from our schools alone.

### **Moving Forward: Getting from What to How**

If (irony fully intended) the easy part in this extraordinary process is everything outlined thus far, then the hard part is figuring out a way to actually make it all happen – moving from the “what” to the “how”. To get to that elusive next level, we have written and rewritten the Implementation Plan countless times in what we now recognize as a natural and important iterative journey of learning and deepening.

Earlier versions of the plan came dangerously close to rebuilding the same system in minimally adjusted form. We've learned to appreciate the stubborn and persistent habits and expectations living in this kind of embedded system and to recognize and correct strategies that boil down to more of the same – just bigger, faster, and with a heftier budget. We've become brutally honest, at one point declaring a draft that resulted from significant thought and effort more “pork barrel” than transformative.<sup>xi</sup>

The final Implementation Plan represents an enormous progression from tweaking to transformation. The Transformation Academy, its Dean, Fellows, and Implementation Teams create a new structure that can support an initiative of this size, scope, and complexity. The methodology of Participatory Action Research, imbued throughout, will ensure deep connection with, and a powerful voice for, those most affected by the work. The structures and methods are innovative, and we are confident that they establish the correct priorities, necessary space, and fulfillment of trust that will make this work successful.

## **STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING: WHAT IT IS AND HOW WE GET THERE**

*“The stress hasn't come from the rubrics of the projects. It's come from the pressure ... artistic pressure. Get students interested so they're feeling that pressure.” – A Student<sup>xii</sup>*

The stories comprising the preface of this document represent an ideal. A successfully transformed school system should effectively engage a student from the moment he or she wakes up in the morning, until the moment they go to sleep. Not that *school* needs to dominate the student's day, but that *learning* is present in all that he or she does. It is at this level of engagement that the higher aims of passion, ambition, resilience, and creativity are realized and true learning happens.

We have consistently heard from students that the current high school curriculum is “engagement-deficient.”<sup>xiii</sup> We have also effectively used high-quality student-centered learning to increase learner engagement in individual classrooms and formal, research-based small-scale pilots.<sup>xiv</sup> Drawing the connection between engagement and achievement, we believe, that:

1. Engagement is an essential precondition of learning;
2. Learning is fundamental to achievement in school and in life; therefore
3. Outcomes will improve only in as much as learners are more authentically engaged in their learning.

Student-centered learning is, for us, a means, not an end. All students, including those who face the greatest barriers, achieve more when learning attends to who they are, what they need and how their minds work. We believe that student-centered learning is.<sup>xv</sup>

**Personalized:** Students embrace their unique learning styles and understand their needs as learners. Their questions, interests, pace, and capacities are central to curriculum and demonstrations of learning.

**Relevant:** Students pose questions, engage in learning, use technologies, and develop skills relevant to their lives. They pursue concepts and demonstrate learning and achievement in ways that are compelling to them.

**Authentic:** Students identify and engage in work worth doing, make meaningful connections between disciplines, collaborate with classmates, and present to real world audiences. These audiences include peers, families, and members of local and online communities.

**Technology-Rich:** Students learn in ways that close the gap between their in-school and out-of-school technology lives. The many technologies students use are powerful tools for learning and are integrated in meaningful ways by skillful teachers.

**Active:** Students are active and moving, engaged in hands-on, often field-based, learning. They explore, and with the support of a knowledgeable and facilitative teacher, tackle work that they find challenging and interesting. They seek and generate rather than passively receive knowledge.

**Diverse:** Students celebrate the individuality and diversity of their learning community. Different views, experiences, and beliefs are honored by teachers and students alike.

In converting a Student-Centered Learning definition into a plan, it’s tempting to create a laundry list of topic-based activities. The danger in yielding to such temptation, however, is in quickly overwhelming the capacity of people and current structures to make meaningful progress.

We see a major departure in our plan in that, instead of beginning with a list of detailed strategies to increase achievement, we develop the *mechanisms* through which change will be explored, designed and implemented in collaborative settings. These mechanisms ensure the necessary ground level buy-in for change is embedded from the beginning, because said changes will *come from* the ground level.

### **The Transformation Academy: A Shared Asset to Support Student-Centered Learning**

In our design, a new body called “The Transformation Academy” becomes the creative engine driving the design and implementation of a new system of student-centered learning. The Academy has two chief functions: 1) to establish and facilitate an ambitious model for teacher learning and career development; and 2) to support and coordinate stakeholder engagement in the inquiry-based work needed to generate the practices and policies of a student-centered learning system. The Academy will be staffed by a new Dean of Transformation, five paid Fellows (a combination of local teachers, service providers and community members), a Communications and Logistics Manager, and teaching faculty.

Teacher Learning and Career Development: At the heart of the Academy is a research-based design structure to support teacher learning. Teachers learn by critically inquiring into the issues and concerns relevant to their own day-to-day realities. The content of professional development is multifaceted and most useful when it focuses on “concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation and reflection;” specific pedagogical skills and how to teach specific content to learners; and student learning.<sup>xvi</sup> Ball and

Cohen (1999) suggested a framework of “learning in and from practice” grounded in Little’s (1990) emphasis on joint work, that professional development engages educators in a new kind of understanding of teaching, one that is inquiry-based and collaborative.

Accordingly, the Transformation Academy provides all district educators with custom designed, embedded, and credit-bearing learning opportunities. Highly involved educators will have opportunities including fellowships, Master’s level and advanced graduate study built around their transformation work; other educators will have access to credit bearing opportunities that may lead to specialized certificates. The Steering Committee and Transformation Academy leadership will work during early implementation to design alternative career pathways and diversified roles for educators.<sup>xvii</sup>

Stakeholder Engagement in Learning: By binding together key constituency groups in learning, we generate the real work of transformation. These constituencies, which need ongoing support and development, include students, educators, families, and community partners. Flourishing constituency groups are better equipped to be full collaborators in the transformation process.

### **Constituency Groups**

Students - *Youth Involvement and Partnering for Change*: Building on the Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together (YATST) framework and facilitated by a paid fellow, youth from diverse backgrounds and experiences are trained and supported to take leadership roles in school change; adults are trained and supported to engage effectively with youth leaders. Such student training has already begun through a series of conferences and workshops this year.<sup>xviii</sup>

Educators - *The Transformation Academy*: A standing, year-round body is shared between districts to develop and deliver high-quality, technology-rich, culturally competent, relevant educator learning, and to support participatory action research and collaborative inquiry processes. New capacity is found in the Dean, Fellows and Communications and Logistics Manager described above, and in course faculty.

Families - *Family-School Partnerships*: Formal school-based teams modeled on the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) work to ensure that families are active partners in shaping school transformation and personalized learning; family members and school personnel are trained and encouraged to engage effectively with one another to support improved student outcomes. New Family-School Partnership developers add capacity to existing district structures.

Community - *Community-Based Partnerships*: Community-based organizations formally collaborate with schools both as key partners in school transformation and as essential providers of high-quality community-based learning opportunities; community partners add crucial capacity to the system, particularly in meeting the needs of marginalized learners and families. The fellow for Community-Based Partnerships shepherds this collaboration.

Integrated Leadership - *Initiative Management*: A broadly-representative Steering Committee engages in appreciative inquiry<sup>xix</sup> and broad communication to fuel positive momentum; inside-outside leadership structure adds capacity and accountability mechanisms to support transformation. The Steering Committee is comprised of representative community stakeholders, including school principals, and will be supported by the Communications and Logistics Manager.

Implementation Teams, populated by members of each constituency group, are designed to engage in collaborative learning and research, generate products and make policy recommendations related to their topic. Teams make use of a variety of negotiated inquiry structures, including PLCs, graduate coursework, action research, visitation and conferences. The focus of their work will change with the emerging priorities of the initiative. Successful early implementation rests on five Implementation Teams.

### **Implementation Teams:**

1. Youth Leadership & Involvement: includes developing skills and dispositions among all stakeholders to effectively and authentically involve students in all aspects of teaching, learning and transformation.
2. Family-School Partnership: includes involving *all* families effectively in student-centered, technology-rich learning; effective communication; and involving *all* families in ongoing school change.

3. Community-Based Learning Opportunities: includes identification of community-based partners; strategies for embedding effective and innovative learning in the community; and training developed with and for community partners on PLPs and assessment.
4. Effective Teaming Practices: involves identifying, training, launching, and supporting effective teaching teams in both districts.
5. Personalized and Proficiency-Based Learning: includes proficiency-based assessment, progress, and graduation; learning beyond the school walls; flexible use of time; 1:1 technology-rich learning; effective transitions; post-secondary success; and learning management systems.

Three strands run across all implementation teams: attending to **student engagement**, a particular focus on **vulnerable populations**, and **technology integration**. Careful attention to these strands throughout the work of the teams will ensure the most lasting, positive change in our schools.

### **Participatory Action Research**

The Transformation Academy builds upon an existing foundation that values collaborative inquiry.<sup>xx</sup> In particular, teaching practice evolves in significant and powerful ways when teams of educators work together in pursuit of common goals. “This model . . . requires educators to shift the paradigm from more traditional professional development and informal common planning time to structured and disciplined collaboration with focused outcomes.”<sup>xxi</sup>

Research suggests that the relationships and opportunities inherent in effective collaboration are what enable a sustained focus on data analysis and continuous improvement. “Teachers could conduct cycles of inquiry individually in their classrooms, but they rarely do so on their own. Collaboration seems to add both motivation and value.”<sup>xxii</sup>

In our design, collaborative improvement will involve: 45 annual Implementation Team participants; additional stakeholders engaged through their respective constituency groups; an expanding network of effective educator teams (beginning in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades); 40-50% of teachers participating in Academy coursework in Year 1; and upwards of 90% participating in the Academy overall.

The story, cycle and staging of the Transformation Academy is depicted in greater detail for all constituencies and Implementation Teams in Appendices B, C, D and E, which detail the following:

1. The five key constituencies of the transformation initiative,
2. The essential five Implementation Teams of the initial stages of the project
3. The collaborative learning opportunities and outcomes that will be pursued, and
4. Custom designs, embedded credit and degree-bearing opportunities to promote educator leadership.

The Transformation Academy will employ Participatory Action Research (PAR) to deepen and extend the existing ethic of collaborative inquiry to include the involvement of all constituencies.<sup>xxiii</sup> “Participatory action research is not just research,” but gains value by directly engaging stakeholders in the research, evaluation and improvement process.<sup>xxiv</sup> Research underscores the particularly important role students can play in identifying challenges, inquiring into problems, and collaboratively designing solutions.<sup>xxv</sup>

Participatory Action Research binds together critical facets of our work: developing student-centered learning opportunities for all students; authentically engaging the voice and values of stakeholders; critically evaluating results; and ensuring sustainable, continuous, system-wide improvement.

## **STUDENT IMPACT**

*“The idea that learning starts and stops at a certain time. It’s fascinating. Baffling.” – A Student*<sup>xxvi</sup>

The goal of this work is to improve student learning, increase achievement, and ultimately better prepare students for post-secondary education, the workforce and citizenship in a changing world.

### **Learning Goals**

Our definition of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills builds on the work of Vermont’s Education Transformation Commission, Department of Education and State Board of Education. They are:<sup>xxvii</sup>

- Critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- Creativity and innovation
- Communication and collaboration skills
- Information and media literacy
- The ability to use information and communication technology
- Flexibility and adaptability
- The ability to demonstrate initiative, productivity and self-direction, as well as leadership, responsibility, ethics and accountability
- Social and cross-cultural skills
- Rigorous academics in traditional disciplines (English, math, science, and social studies) and expanded emphasis on 21<sup>st</sup> century disciplines (world languages, economics, entrepreneurship, personal finance, health, arts, ecology, political science)

In 2010, the Vermont State Board of Education adopted the Common Core Standards<sup>xxviii</sup>, which align learning goals with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills outlined above and specifically frame student progress in English Language Arts and Mathematics in terms of college and career readiness.<sup>xxix</sup>

Our initiative, like the Common Core, seeks to embed 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skill development – including mastery of essential skills and knowledge and rigor in the areas of ELA and math – throughout our Student-Centered Learning agenda. We will target dedicated improvement as outlined in the August 2011 reports: *Vermont’s Transition to the Common Core: English Language Arts and Mathematics*.<sup>xxx</sup> This work is already underway in both school districts.

To promote embedded skill development, mastery and readiness, our strategies are:

Teacher Learning: Broad, sophisticated and effective structures support teachers in implementing student-centered learning.<sup>xxxi</sup> *Strategies: Transformation Academy; Fellowship system; Implementation Teams; teaming structure; systems to support family- and community-based partnerships; hiring practices reflect SCL vision and goals.*

Student-Centered, Technology-Rich Learning: Learning opportunities consistently embody the fundamental tenets of student-centered learning, effectively increasing student engagement levels in measurable ways. Learning environments fit who students are and how they learn.<sup>xxxii</sup> *Strategies: learning opportunities consistently exhibit core tenets of SCL; multiple pathways; increased flexibility in use of time; 1:1 technology integration; increased community- and workplace-based learning opportunities; expanded college access supports.*

Proficiency-Based Learning, Assessment, Progress and Graduation: Co-developed plans grounded in relevant learner proficiency chart a clear course through school and successful post-secondary transitions.<sup>xxxiii</sup> *Strategies: policy-driven proficiency-based graduation system; Personalized Learning Plan system; core standards and proficiency benchmark system; assessment system to chart student progress; advisory structure; portfolio system.*

Family and Community Involvement: Every learner is more successful when supported by caring adults who are directly engaged in their learning.<sup>xxxiv</sup> *Strategies: co-development of PLPs by learners, educators & caring adults; families invited to participate in student learning; student-led portfolio-based conferencing; demonstrations of learning in public settings.*

### **Additional Supports for Marginalized Learners**

Given the substantial barriers faced by many low-income and New American learners, we will ensure:

Personalization and Proficiency: At their core, personalization and proficiency are about understanding and meeting the needs of *every* learner, and ensuring that progress tracks according to

understanding, not a calendar.<sup>xxxv</sup> *Strategies: diverse multi-age learning cohorts and eventual movement away from traditional grade groupings; establishment and clear tracking of proficiencies especially in fundamental skills; cultural competencies and responsiveness system; embedded marginalized learner focus throughout all teacher learning.*

Additional and Accelerated Supports: Many learners will need increased learning time and opportunities to overcome language, cultural and economic barriers.<sup>xxxvi</sup> *Strategies: school-based drop-in centers; school- and community-based remedial learning opportunities and homework help.*  
Equitable Access to Technology: Learners and families with limited financial means consistently have the least access to technology, and face the detrimental effects of the “digital divide”.<sup>xxxvii</sup> *Strategies: ensure that every student has 24/7 access to the technology he or she needs to learn; support families in understanding how students use technology to facilitate learning.*

Family and Community Partnerships: Relationships grounded in trust are essential.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Schools will work to cultivate new levels of understanding and trust with marginalized families and community groups. Schools will also partner to support, recognize and credit learning that takes place in community settings where a level of trust and comfort already exist, meeting learners and families where they are. *Strategies: co-development of PLPs; student-led portfolio conferencing; family and community engagement strategies; expansion of community-based remedial learning opportunities.*

### **Alignment with the Science of How Students Learn**

Our transformation initiative is rooted deeply in the science of how students learn. Psychological research has long indicated that motivation is key to learning and that creating essential learning preconditions includes building on students' intrinsic motivation and maintaining high expectations.<sup>xxxix</sup> Our plan includes a deep focus on student-centered and personalized learning, through which engagement, relevant curriculum and authentic assessment are essential means toward this motivation for learning.

Psychological research also suggests that students learn when they engage in self-directed learning and apply their new knowledge to authentic problems and real situations.<sup>xl</sup> Leaders in both the educational and psychological communities have long demonstrated that successful school reform must not only uphold standards but also be learner-centered, recognizing students' differences and unique learning styles.<sup>xli</sup> Our heavy emphasis on Personalized Learning Plans directly responds to the compelling science behind learning styles and differences.

Finally, teacher efficacy is another key piece of the educational puzzle and more effective teacher beliefs about how students learn must be a component of educator professional development.<sup>xlii</sup> The Transformation Academy, a pivotal feature of our plan, is designed with precisely this in mind.

### **Assessment of and Responsiveness to Student Progress Indicators at Multiple Levels**

Student Level: Because PLPs will be grounded in proficiencies and a clear track through high school graduation, they will provide a consistent measure of forward progress. PLPs will be developed and managed by students in partnership with caring adults, supporting relationship-based encouragement and accountability. Effective two-way communication structures between schools and families will provide clear information about student proficiency level and progress toward post-secondary goals.

Team Level: Inherent in our Collaborative Inquiry and Participatory Action Research processes are ongoing, data-driven assessments of student learning and adjustment of practice to improve results for all learners. School and District Administrators and the Dean of the Transformation Academy will work with each Fellow and his or her Implementation Team to review benchmarks and support assessment. Teachers will be challenged to identify and work with data that are useful to them in improving outcomes.

School Level: Our schools use local and national assessment indicators to monitor student progress. With a system of local common assessments that link to core standards, the schools are increasingly able to benchmark and track student learning from fall to spring, student-by-student and cohort-by-cohort. These assessments are performance-based and are complemented by student work on formal assessments that compare and corroborate learning against national norms.<sup>xliii</sup>

State Level: The State is in the process of developing a new assessment system to measure learner progress on the Common Core. The legislatively-enabled statewide Prek-16 Council has made proficiency-based assessment and graduation its top priority.

Both school districts struggle with a coherent system of data management that accurately defines, and effectively and efficiently tracks, student progress. This is currently a major challenge, and will be an important task of the Implementation Team on Personalization and Proficiency. Piloting the Learning Management System will help to inform this work going forward.

### **Successful Transitions *Into* High School: A Parallel Local Funding Partner Initiative**

One of the essential steps in focusing impact at the student level is stepping outside of the high school box. To do that, this initiative puts a great deal of attention on successful learner transitions, both into and out of high school. While Nellie Mae funds will be focused on work at the secondary level, the local funding partner on the project will be supporting parallel work in our districts' middle schools.

The Richard E. and Deborah L. Tarrant Foundation and the Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education at the University of Vermont have worked for the past six years to develop, implement and evaluate student-centered, technology-rich learning in middle schools throughout Vermont. This research-based initiative combines deep, sustained teacher learning; technology-integration; and best practices in student-centered learning to promote student engagement and improve learner outcomes. A pilot program at Edmunds Middle School in Burlington (5 teachers; 90 students) has been underway for three years.

If a DLSC grant is awarded, **the Foundation pledges a new \$200,000 cash investment** in our districts' middle schools with a focus on teacher learning cohorts, technology incentive grants and support for school leaders in successfully moving to a 1:1 approach. This work will help build understanding of and demand for student-centered, technology-rich learning, and cultivate *crucial* alignment to effectively support students as they move across the precipitous transition between middle and high school.

## **RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS**

*“I need it to be done now.” – An Administrator*<sup>xliv</sup>

The Planning Year has helped us gain a true sense of the significant, sustained and coordinated effort, effective structures, and new capacity required to achieve transformation at scale (see Appendix F).

### **Building Momentum**

The most effective fuel to our effort over these many months (and in the years leading up) has been the evidence of forward progress. Some of the indicators are firm, quantifiable demonstrations, while others feel much softer and often emerge in conversation rather than in metrics.

A powerful culminating moment came at our October 2011 forum, when broad publicity, personal phone calls, emails and follow-ups brought together 100 people from a wide variety of backgrounds to the Winooski Community Center for 2½ hours on a Wednesday night.<sup>xlv</sup> As the littlest kids played together in childcare, older youth and adults packed into the community room to share a meal, learn about the project and timeline, and think about school transformation. The depth of conversation and commitment to the work that came out of that meeting were remarkable.<sup>xlvi</sup>

Additional indications of positive momentum are framed below using our “inside/outside” framework:

#### “Inside” (School-Based) Momentum

*Systems Level*: Numerous structures have emerged or been implemented that contribute energy and/or apply pressure to the transformation process.

- First-ever cross-district School Development Institute (SDI) (summer 2011) brought 40% of BHS and WHS faculties together for intensive learning and design work, resulting in a formal alignment of schedules between the districts, collaborative planning time, and implementation of a year-end personalized learning intensive for all students in both districts as a broad pilot.

- Established Burlington middle-level student-centered, technology-rich learning pilot has increased demand among learners, families and educators. After a daylong visit to the pilot site, Winooski Middle School committed to moving forward with its own pilot and expansion plans in 2011-2012.
- The Burlington and Winooski School Districts both worked with PIRC-VT to launch Family-School Partnership Teams using the NNPS Model during the 2010-2011 school year. They have additionally dedicated Title I and SIG funds to create internal staff capacity to support family-school partnerships and to provide ongoing professional development for principals, teachers and families.
- BHS & WHS students participated in statewide Youth and Adults Transforming Together events. BHS became a YATST school, held an orientation (13 students; 3 staff), launched the CONNECT (YATST) team, and conducted and are analyzing a school-wide teacher-student survey. Students and advisors attended retreats and trainings, and one advisor is enrolled in a YATST graduate course.
- Burlington School District Diversity & Equity Task Force Report (published October 2011) resulted in the creation of a standing committee on Diversity and Equity and adoption of a set of recommendations to increase diversity, equity and inclusion across the Burlington Schools.
- Cross-District Appreciative Inquiry Summit [funded by a local business] is in planning for spring 2012. The summit will highlight meaningful examples of great teaching and learning happening in our communities, and will be explicitly designed to reinforce our Nellie Mae work.

*Human Level:* Many teachers and students have responded positively to voice documentation and new learning and leadership opportunities over the past year.

- “When you take your faculty and you invite them to participate in professional work that is self-guided, when you take them out of the dismal structure in which they work and really treat them like professionals, they will do that work. I think there’s some really fabulous stuff that came out of this year’s SDI, and it was guided by the currents of Nellie Mae.”<sup>xlvii</sup> (Teacher)
- “It’s hard to make things organic that aren’t. And that’s what works really well ... The SDI this summer felt about as organic as I think it can. And every single group that I’ve attended, they’ve left feeling rejuvenated and inspired.”<sup>xlviii</sup> (Teacher)
- “I feel like the administration is in a place where I think they are willing to accept criticism, to accept suggestions and to work with students and community members to make a school that kids *want* to go to, that kids are proud of, and that kids, like, really ... *value*.”<sup>xlix</sup> (Student)
- “[The Nellie Mae Project] ... It’s like an omnivore’s dilemma.<sup>1</sup> (Student)

#### “Outside” (Community-Based) Momentum

*Systems Level:* Significant progress has been made in developing effective nascent systems to support community engagement in school transformation.

- Voices for Vermont’s Children has overseen a steady march of community engagement work over the past year from initial conversations through community organizer training and emergence of new structures. An important example of progress was a meeting of school leaders (superintendents, principals, ELL directors) and elected New American leaders in a “parallel power” setting (9/17).
- Several non-profit organizations working with youth and families in Burlington and Winooski have recently created or expanded programs to improve academic outcomes, especially for marginalized and New American students. This focus on academic support is new, and in many cases has resulted in formalized school/non-profit partnerships, and in significantly improved results for learners.

*Human Level:* Comments occasionally heard early on in this project about the “impossible” task of effectively engaging marginalized families have been incontrovertibly refuted. Comments now often express excitement about the kinds of conversations and interactions that are taking place, and a true appreciation of the amount and type of work required to do it well.

- A broad cross-section of community members clearly identified student-centered learning with

proficiency and mastery of skills as their top education priority in Burlington and Winooski.<sup>li</sup>

- New American parent: *We never had a meeting like this before with school people and we are happy that you are doing this. We are happy to work together and have some discussion with school.*<sup>lii</sup>
- New American Parent: *After these meetings, we can say what we need to say and we together can find a solution. And the teachers can tell us what issues they have with us, problems with the parents or kids or stuff like that. Working together is the main thing. That's how we can solve these issues.*<sup>liii</sup>

### **Strengths and Challenges: Aligning Assets to Support Momentum and Navigate Barriers**

We have a substantial catalogue of assets to support this process, and many gaps and challenges. We include here a few examples of how assets can be redeployed to support transformation, but the bulk of that strategy work be done by Implementation Teams as they conduct important explorations of alternative systems and develop authority to advocate for changes in how resources are utilized.

Prioritization and pruning are essential, as it won't be possible (or effective) to do everything. The Initiative Mapping Tool validates our opportunity to integrate many initiatives under one organizational umbrella, bringing new human and financial resources to bear. Our goal is not to direct transformation for practitioners, but to establish the conditions in which *they* will make change grow.<sup>liv</sup>

#### Human Capital:

*Inside (School) – Assets:* 40% of faculty in both districts attended summer 2011 School Development Institute; all principals in both districts and 10% of faculty are trained in NNPS team model; YATST student leadership trainings, and data-collection and analysis exercises. **Challenges:** Pervasive teacher and administrator work overload; persistent reticence among some faculty.

*Outside (Community) – Assets:* 30 newly trained community organizers; 35 parents trained in NNPS team model; active leaders on diversity issues in both communities and the Burlington City Govt.

**Challenges:** overtaxed existing grassroots leaders; relationship building takes time.

*Alignment & Reinforcement Opportunities (Accomplished and Identified):* “early adopters” among faculty support colleagues through significant peer learning opportunities; cross-district model enables peer admin-level support; plan cultivates *new* leadership and human capital to add capacity inside and outside; initially different family-school partnership team models in the two districts are now aligned.

#### Data Systems:

*Inside – Assets:* WHS and BHS partner with the VT Common Assessment Tool (VCAT); team-level pilot of EDU 2.0 Learning Management System in Burlington's Edmunds Middle School. **Challenges:** No existing PLP management system.

*Outside – Assets:* PLP management system currently used by VT High School Completion Program; various Learning Management System pilots under way in 1:1 laptop schools affiliated with our community partners; database of community-based internships and business partners. **Challenges:** Disconnect between school and non-school data systems.

*Alignment & Reinforcement:* Adaption and expansion of small-scale systems already in place.

#### Infrastructure:

*Inside – Assets:* 3-year contract in districts allows time for new labor relations work to unfold; cross-district schedule alignment achieved in 2011; cultural competency training and curriculum development work underway in BSD. **Challenges:** Current BHS infrastructure cannot support school-wide 1:1; existing punitive policy in No Child Left Behind dictates rigid structures.

*Outside – Assets:* congregation-based community organizing work by VT Interfaith Action; “Courageous Conversations” series on race in Burlington. **Challenges:** Local economic conditions create anxiety about changes that are perceived as potentially requiring new funding streams.

*Alignment & Reinforcement:* Districts have already accomplished substantial resource allocation to support 1:1; “friendly” state policy; track record of community conversation re: complex topics.

#### Management and Leadership:

*Inside – Assets:* Leadership coaches in place in both HSs; new BSD Secondary Improvement

Coordinator; teacher-led PLCs active in both districts on transformation-related topics<sup>lv</sup>; BHS Roland Fellow (.5 FTE) with transformation focus; YATST; Diversity and Equity Task Force. **Challenges:** Overloaded principals; nascent diversity in youth leadership work.

**Outside – Assets:** Deeply-committed community partners; Governor’s *Connecting the Dots* summit (October 2011); Prek-16 Council; newly-named Deputy Commissioner for Transformation and Innovation; existing higher-ed. partnerships to support student-centered learning. **Challenges:** leadership in issue-specific areas (vs. in system-wide vision); competition for airtime and resources.

**Alignment & Reinforcement:** Key ingredients to effective management and leadership, including collaborative teacher learning, youth leadership and empowerment, a focus on diversity and equity, and deeply committed community partners, all emerged prior to the NMEF initiative, as authentic expressions of emerging dispositions aligned with the implementation plan.

### Initiative Alignment

Our Initiative Mapping Tools reveal several categories of work underway, representing a combination of district priorities and SIG mandates carrying funding from a variety of local, state, and federal sources.

**Teacher Learning:** PLCs; PD to support ELL; Teacher Mentoring; Co-Teaching; Student-Centered, Technology-Rich Learning

**Mastery of Essential Skills and Knowledge:** Vermont Math Initiative; Comprehensive Reading Remediation and Support; 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning and 1:1; College/University Partnerships;

**Underserved/Marginalized Students:** Diversity & Equity Com.; Cultural Competencies; ELL training

**Multiple Pathways:** Extended Learning Opportunities; Magnet Schools

**Family-School Partnerships:** Family-School Partnership Teams and Training

**Infrastructure:** Labor Relations Work (Urbanski via NMEF TA grant); Common Assessments, Teacher Assessment; Positive Behavior Intervention Support; Leadership Capacity

There is significant purpose alignment across these initiatives with our SCL agenda. The challenge lies in syncing the *activities* of multiple initiatives to prevent overload and ensure progress.

A key function and benefit of our collaborative learning and inquiry strategy is creating coordination and efficiency across initiative work. Technology integration and ELL strategies, for instance, are not distinct tracks but rather are embedded within movement on Math, ELA and broad personalization. It’s both bad practice and completely impossible to try to function otherwise.

## GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

*“Where is the structuralization of a boundary pusher? Who is sitting at the table who aggressively pursues the big and bold? Because otherwise, as we achieve the concrete steps toward ... for instance, a proficiency-based system ... there will be a temptation to say ‘this is enough’.” – A Teacher<sup>lvi</sup>*

Over the past 18 months, our communities have shown remarkable unity, leadership, endurance and courage in embarking on the road toward a new vision for learning, and a shared sense of responsibility for student outcomes. This is reflected in the formal bond across our two school districts, the sustained, intense effort of a broad range of partners, and a palpably blossoming movement within our communities.

### Meaningful Learning Experiences and Student Outcomes are Valued in our Communities

Already during the application and planning process, the immediate circle of the application team experienced turnover at both the staff and board level; district administration positions emerged and disappeared; multiple family leaves took place; a fellowship began; community partner staff transitioned; state policy changes were announced; and Burlington entered an election cycle.

While we have missed the individuals who left and welcomed those who joined the initiative, and have felt the effect of changes in the education and community landscapes, the impact on the work has been positive. The structures that have been built, while still evolving, have proven resilient. Broad partnership, shared ownership and capacity, and a growing scaffold of stakeholder engagement and leadership are

effectively bearing the weight that such a lengthy process conveys. This work is sustainable because the core values belong to all of us.

### **Broad Awareness and Involvement**

Within the specific governance and leadership structures in our schools and communities, awareness, engagement and influence have been built on numerous levels:

City Leaders: The goals of this initiative are aligned with the long-term visions and plans of the Cities of Winooski and Burlington. *Winooski:* The City and School District have made a noteworthy commitment to shared vision, undertaking a joint strategic planning process, co-publishing a monthly newsletter and showing a strong commitment to working together in daily business. *Burlington:* The nationally recognized Burlington Legacy Project, a 30-year initiative launched in 2000, emphasizes four “E’s” to guide the community: Education, Economy, Equity and Environment, reflecting a strong administrative and community commitment intended to withstand decades of transition among elected officials. Enlisting the support of current officials, our work has engaged elected officials (and hopefuls) in 1:1 meetings and stakeholder conversations and forums.

School Board: School Boards in both districts are decisively and formally on record in support of the initiative and have directly participated in stakeholder groups, work groups and the Nellie Mae Learning Institute. They have been careful, though, to preserve leadership at the ground level. In the words of one official, “You *can* impose things from the top, but they’re like plants without strong roots. You need to have ideas grow ... not just from the teachers ... but the parents, community members, administrators.”<sup>lvii</sup>

Education Leaders: The commitment of leaders and administrators within our schools could not be clearer. They have shouldered tremendous leadership responsibility for this work, articulating an ambitious vision for their schools, embedding the work in their schools’ goals and activities for the year, and prioritizing NMEF tasks in their personal weekly schedules. Outside of the schools, leaders from the Department of Education have directly participated on work groups and in stakeholder meetings, the Chair of the House Education Committee has attended and spoken at key forums, and the Commissioner of Educ. has given his endorsement. In October 2011, the details and learnings-to-date of the Nellie Mae Project were explored with education leaders statewide at the VT School Board Association Conference.

Labor Unions: Union delegates and members have participated in the project on every level including the Steering Committee<sup>lviii</sup>, work groups, stakeholder meetings, and interviews. To support this work moving forward, School Board Members and Union Leaders from both districts jointly issued an invitation to Adam Urbanski to begin a consultancy on evolving contract negotiations. That process, supported by NMEF technical assistance funds, begins in November and will continue during Implementation to ensure that approaches to contract negotiations evolve as a part of broad education transformation in ways that honor and protect the professional work of teachers, and ultimately enhance student-centered learning.

Community: Community-based organizations and providers have a long history of formal partnership with both districts. Arrangements include service contracts, donated office space to embed programs in schools, employment of district teachers at community-based academic enrichment programs, and numerous other examples. Our schools’ commitment to ensuring deep partnership with community organizations is exemplified in the significant allocation of NMEF Planning Year funds to those partners to support project participation and leadership.

Shared ownership and alignment have been created not just by careful coordination across these leadership groups, but also by the sequencing and feedback loops embedded in the process.

### **Feedback Loops and Accountability**

There was a funny moment early in our Logic Model drafting when we attempted literally to draw the feedback loop process into our illustration. We quickly abandoned the idea as the page became a tangle of looping lines and arrows. Influence and revision were not activities in the process – they *were* the process.

The four main workgroups that built the Logic Model were comprised of stakeholder representatives. Each of those groups was charged with convening and documenting voice from a broader body of

stakeholders to inform their planning. Hundreds of pages of conversation transcripts and summaries were collected. Stakeholders gathered to do more in-depth work at two daylong, facilitated retreats. The tenets of the Logic Model were shared back with stakeholders at faculty meetings, student/parent nights, community forums and committee meetings.

The loop process was taken to the next level during Implementation Plan development. The summer School Development Institute (SDI) and subsequent PLC groups provided a large body of teachers a chance to do substantial deep planning work. Several elements of the plan emerged directly from this process. Interviews and community engagement work continued into the fall, and in October the draft Implementation Plan was presented at a community forum attended by over 100 diverse stakeholders, who worked intensively in pairs and small groups.<sup>lix</sup> The evening culminated with many people signing up for new work and leadership roles moving forward.

The remainder of October has been taken up with a careful reconciliation and prioritization of the Implementation Plan draft to reflect the evolving work of these groups and the core themes revealed through stakeholder engagement. The decision-making process at the Steering Committee level has been grounded in a strict adherence to these values and priorities.

### **Embedded Leadership and Structures**

The process described in our Implementation Plan, and work grounded in Participatory Action Research, ensure that authority and power are disaggregated and woven throughout the change process. This arrangement both establishes ownership in the correct places, and ensures continuity of the work through inevitable leadership transitions.

For instance, policy change (described under “Sustainability”) will not be the purview of any single individual or entity. Necessary changes will be evaluated and undertaken as part of the work of each Implementation Team. Group leaders and members will have the opportunity to evaluate obstacles, explore alternatives, develop proposals, and advocate for necessary changes.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND DEMAND**

*“We live in a unique area, lots of non-profits, interesting people, interesting things ...” – A Student<sup>lx</sup>*

We believe that school-, family-, and community-based partnerships are essential to learner success and to building an enduring new vision for public education. You read in substantial detail in our “Student-Centered Learning” section how diverse stakeholders will be directly engaged in learning, Participatory Action Research grounded in cultural competency, and implementation of a new student-centered learning system. 50% of each Implementation Team will be comprised of parents and community partners. Two of the five Fellows will potentially be non-educators.<sup>lxi</sup>

Shifting from the direct work undertaken via the Transformation Academy, we discuss here the mechanisms that will support *broad* engagement of stakeholders, cultivate new leadership, and build the capacity of constituency groups who are necessary players in school change.

Traditionally, community organization around education has been framed as Inside *versus* Outside. Neighborhood groups make a choice of strategy, deciding either to pursue direct relationships with educators as service providers, or to apply pressure for change from outside the system via more confrontational demand-based activities.<sup>lxii</sup> Each approach has apparent benefits and drawbacks:

- An inside approach focuses on relationships and collaboration, cultivating shared ownership of learner outcomes and building pathways for productive, amicable conversations about school change. “The danger in working from the inside is that the group may find itself so deeply lodged in school-supportive relationships that it becomes exceedingly difficult to raise issues of poor school performance or develop the political leverage necessary to generate change.”<sup>lxiii</sup>
- An outside approach, focusing on developing the capacity of individuals and organizations outside of the school system to articulate and demand desired improvements, avoids the risk of overly

cozy change agents losing the credibility and incentive required for strong action. But it also limits the capacity for change by keeping schools working in isolation.

With the support of our Lead Community Partner and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, we've worked to maximize the advantages and minimize the drawbacks of these approaches by pursuing them *both*. We will develop collaborative, capacity-generating relationships with individuals and organizations to support learners and create new opportunities. Voices for Vermont's Children will oversee grassroots community organizing and leadership development to empower strong voices for change.

You saw evidence in our "Resources and Supports" section of the momentum fueled by our growing track record of successful engagement work.<sup>lxiv</sup> We are confident that we can do this work well because, at least by some measure, we already are. Our long-term objectives are:

1. A sense of shared responsibility for learner outcomes; and
2. Increased capacity in our communities to support desired learner outcomes.

The details of the "outside" portion of this strategy are captured in our Lead Community Partner narrative and work plan. The "inside" piece resides here.

### **"Inside" Our Approach**

Our "inside" work is about growing capacity within our schools to increase meaningful opportunities for youth leadership, and to effectively communicate and partner with stakeholders to improve learning outcomes. That work will unfold at four levels:

1. Diverse youth leaders who are actively engaged in driving transformation. To develop authentic youth leadership, we will provide and value the time, space, and opportunities for youth – supported by adults – to be engaged in transformation work. We will:
  - Build on Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together to support learning and leadership opportunities for diverse youth who care about school change;
  - Create new opportunities for youth to partner across districts to develop, pursue, and build an advocacy base for change objectives (supported by ongoing youth-led research); and
  - Ensure that all leadership structures facilitate and require effective youth participation.
2. Families and individuals supporting the progress of specific learners. Because all learners do better when supported by caring adults, we will:
  - Directly involve caring adults in the design of individual learner goals and pathways;
  - Support and encourage educators in integrating regular opportunities for all families to engage in attainment and demonstrations of student learning; and
  - Improve two-way communication between schools and families to provide clear information about student proficiency and progress toward post-secondary goals.
3. Community groups, networks and organizations that support multiple learners. We will engage with community partners that contribute opportunities and capacity to the broad learning system to:
  - Better facilitate partnerships between school- and community-based actors to support authentic learning experiences;<sup>lxv</sup>
  - Improve systems to enhance and credit learning that takes place in non-school settings; and
  - Create new capacity for community-based learning and remediation opportunities.
4. Development of an internal mechanism for shared learning, leadership, and accountability. Continuing to build on the NNPS model, Family-School Partnership Teams will support diverse families, educators, and administrators working together in a collaborative, decision-making capacity to advance schools and evaluate progress. They will create:
  - A shared learning environment, where diverse stakeholders collaborate and work to understand the systems and issues at play;
  - A mechanism for diverse stakeholders to shape implementation as it progresses;

- In the long-term vision, a functional accountability structure grounded in shared responsibility; these teams develop the capacity to move from articulation of what must happen to sharing responsibility for making it happen, and adding capacity to the process.

During Years 1-3, the focus in each area will be on building the structures and human capital that support authentic participation in the change process. In Years 4-6, the new structures will begin to consistently exhibit leadership, accountability and oversight as implementation achieves scale.

### **Reconciling Inevitable Tensions**

We believe that it takes *time* to build trust in relationships, and that trust is fundamental in moving through difficult work and conversations. Our focus here will be relationship building, collaborative learning processes and structures, and clarity about commonly held visions.

*Example:* As the current Family-School Partnership Teams build capacity to engage voices that haven't historically been present at the table, they are surfacing new issues and conflicts. The teams are taking time to work through these issues – even those that don't precisely fit into the school transformation framework – to begin building a track record, and to grow authentic trust among constituents who, 1) don't have prior relationships and 2) start from a place of shared distrust. This kind of practice and achievement of small victories helps build the capacity of the teams to tackle the larger, stickier issues of systems change.

### **Moving the Work Forward**

Partnership has been essential to the entirety of our work. In many cases, community partners have been called upon to manage the heavy lifting associated with voice documentation, emerging community engagement structures, research-based designs for teacher learning, youth voice, and family/school partnerships – and with the management of application deadlines and deliverables.

This is not a result of any lack of vision or will on the part of the schools, but is incontrovertible evidence of the massive pressures and constraints that exist in the current system. School-community partnerships aren't a goal of this initiative; they are its lifeblood.

As the work shifts from planning to implementation, we have set in motion an important redistribution of roles and leadership. Until now there has been an awkward but practical distinction between the NMEF application process and the actual work of transformation. Whereas authentic and diverse stakeholder leadership exists throughout the transformation process – which began in both of our schools long before the Nellie Mae grant and will continue regardless of its outcome – leadership on the grant team has been *representative* instead of *authentic*. This is one of the reasons the team has relied so heavily on local voice, as this has been our chief method of ensuring allegiance to dreams and demands of learners, educators, parents, business people and our communities at large.

Sun-Setting the Steering Committee: Enforcing a drop-deadline in the shift from representative to authentic stakeholder leadership, the existing Steering Committee voted unanimously in October to put itself out of business on December 31, 2011. Many current members will take up new roles on Implementation Teams, family/school partnership teams, and in the Transformation Academy. They will be replaced by emergent leaders who have spent the last year steadily progressing from participation in the voice process, to information gathering and training, to positions of constituent leadership. A detailed plan and timeline to effect this transition is included in the Lead Community Partner application. A \$10,000 facilitation and training line item has been written into our budget each year to support the work of a strong, new Steering Committee, and to ensure the successful transfer of information and decision-making capacity.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

*“Money is hard to get. But it's just money. It's not like a new concept or anything. What's hard is figuring out how to put students in rigorous academic environments.” – A Student <sup>lxvi</sup>*

## Designing for Sustainability – Structures Must Reflect Our Goals and Values

You have heard us say before that we believe the ultimate aim of our work must be a change in the *culture* of how we understand and collaborate to support learning. Leadership, policy, tools, and systems are fundamentally temporary and vulnerable. Resilience will only come as we develop a different, broadly held set of habits and expectations about learning and achievement. A constant theme for us this year has been the awareness that *how* we are working is a direct reflection and prediction of *what* we will achieve. While old habits are hard to break, we have already seen that good structural design can add both capacity and accountability to that process.

*Example:* The Steering Committee intervened in several cases when emergent structures too closely resembled old ways of doing business, or lacked boldness. Though not universally successful, course corrections were achieved by identifying problem areas, clarifying goals, providing resources (esp. human capital), and ensuring accountability.

While a great deal of attention is focused on good structural design right now, we anticipate a diminished need for this type of work as we progress through implementation. New habits will emerge as players get more practiced in different ways of working together to support learning. And, like their less student-centered predecessors, those habits will have sticking power.

Already the types of course-corrections that felt *very* slow and painful in the spring are coming more readily. We know that it will take time for good structural design to become self-perpetuating, but our road to this point gives us confidence that it can be.

## Inspiring, Enlisting and Organizing Supporters

Our voice documentation work over the past year has revealed significant potential among stakeholders to support a global change process:

- Learners may be our most powerful supporters (and our chief critics), in part because many of them are so disdainful of and disillusioned by school as it is now. Learners can also be our finest marketers, compellingly demonstrating what learning can and should look like. *Strategies: implementation-team-led participatory action research; identification of outstanding learner work, esp. via appreciative inquiry; dissemination via social media<sup>lxvii</sup>, public presentations, existing forums, and teacher learning programs; learner voice and leadership; ongoing interviews.*
- Many learners perceive and express education as a matter of justice, demanding better options for those who don't succeed in the traditional system. This belief is echoed in the broader community, particularly in reference to families with limited access to technology. *Strategies: ubiquitous technology access; substantial additional and differentiated supports for most-challenged learners; visioning process; community engagement initiative; learner voice and leadership.*
- Teachers contribute enormous effort and passion to their work, and are in many cases frustrated that the current system doesn't produce the results they want to see for their learners. Despite fatigue and a level of healthy suspicion, hope and vision are palpable. *Strategies: Transformation Academy; implementation-team-led participatory action research; peer learning and support systems; teacher leadership; credit- and degree-bearing opportunities.*
- We have often heard New American parents attribute great value to education, directly correlating a child's success in school to their success later in life. Distinct cultural differences are evident, however, in articulated learning expectations, goals and values. *Strategies: intense outreach and relationship building, esp. via liaisons and New Americans Specialist<sup>lxviii</sup> (now a trained community organizer); community engagement initiative; partnerships with trusted organizations (incl. religious); Participatory Action Research with Implementation Teams.*
- We have many champions at our area's post-secondary institutions, which actively engage in dual-enrollment and see efficacy in student-centered learning to achieve college readiness. Still, a disconnect exists between our secondary and post-secondary schools. *Strategies: direct involvement*

*of higher ed. representatives among project leadership; engagement of higher ed. resources (esp. for teacher learning and youth leadership); relationship building.*

- Many in the business community are enthusiastic about the types of changes we envision because they do not perceive today's graduates as possessing, on the whole, the skills they need. Despite this interest, business leaders typically have very limited engagement in education. *Strategies: awareness and outreach presentations; deeper direct partnerships (esp. internships, mentorship, advising, classroom connections); engagement in Participatory Action Research.*
- Several of our area's most revered human services agencies have recently developed new or expanded dedicated programs to support kids' academic achievement. *Strategies: build on existing effective community-based learning (esp. formal school vacation and after-school learning); continued sharing of district teachers with site-based learning programs.*

### **Learning From, Engaging and Persisting Despite Adversaries and Setbacks**

Despite the perceptible momentum in our community, not everyone is a fan:

- Some families, learners and even educators are concerned that new strategies are misaligned with college readiness and admission requirements, and will make learners *less* prepared and competitive. *Strategies: outreach about the evolution of college admissions processes; partnership with area higher ed. institutions to create and publicize alignment; mechanisms to ensure that proficiency-based transcripts are compatible with admissions processes.*
- At least two student-centered learning pilots in Vermont have faced serious opposition and dissatisfaction from learners and parents who felt well served by the traditional system. Parents rallied significant resistance, in one case issuing a direct challenge to the school principal. While that program now thrives, these are valuable case studies. *Strategies: engagement of traditional power-holders to clarify vision, purpose and essential nature of this shift; clear articulation of compatibility of new learning environment with competitive college admission; peer support for school leaders facing public challenges.*
- In some cases, learners and parents in historically marginalized families have a negative school perception. This lack of perceived value impacts learners' and families' willingness to engage. *Strategies: Personal Learning Plan directly linking school- and community-based learning with long-term goals; presentation of learner work in community settings; involvement of community partners that have trusted relationships with families (esp. in PLPs).*
- Various people inside and outside of the system, including some in leadership positions, have questioned whether these are the right priorities for our schools and communities, and whether we are up to the challenge of pulling off such a major shift. *Strategies: community and stakeholder engagement; accountability mechanisms, esp. Steering Committee; Appreciative Inquiry Summit (Spring 2012), to articulate progress; communication/marketing strategies.*

### **Learning Communities and Benchmarking Progress**

You have already read about the numerous, significant ways that learning communities form the heart of this initiative. We have pursued this strategy because – like you – we believe they are *the* fundamental way that transformation becomes both deep and lasting.

Impact at the individual, cohort and student-body levels will be benchmarked and continuously assessed both by Teaching and Implementation Teams. Using Participatory Action Research, and supported by the School and District Administrators and the Transformation Academy, these groups will identify and utilize relevant data to develop intentional, ongoing and measurable practice improvement.

At the initiative-level, we've taken to heart a caution that it would be possible to write an implementation plan that could be technically satisfied with just incremental progress.<sup>lxix</sup> The new iteration of the Steering Committee's ultimate job will be to ensure the *ambition* and attainment of a holistic transformation agenda in concert with the vision held by our communities.

## **Tipping Sacred Cows: Changing Patterns in Resource Allocation and Contract Negotiations**

In many months of listening, two issues have emerged as both heavily entrenched and anxiety provoking:

Contract Negotiations: Teachers and School Board members bring some of the most passionate and hopeful voices among us to conversations about what is possible in learning transformation. Still, negotiations weigh heavily on their minds. Teachers have clearly expressed concerns about both protections and flexibility needed to support student-centered learning in a contract-oriented environment. Management has echoed these concerns, and expressed some hesitancy about the extent of change that's possible given our negotiating habits and expectations. Both sides have felt vilified somewhere along the way. These anxieties are absolutely legitimate, but are also grounded substantially in *past* experience. Key to successful change will be new inspiration and learning about what's possible, and time to develop and engrain a different set of negotiating habits.

Progress Indicator: Adam Urbanski's presentation at the NMEF Learning Institute created a bit of a spark within our team. Our teacher representatives were particularly enthusiastic, and all team members shared an eagerness to learn more about the Living Contract model. After months of deliberation on the best strategy for NMEF Technical Assistance funds, this evident curiosity and willingness encouraged us to apply that money in support of a joint invitation to Urbanski from our local unions and boards. His consultancy will begin in November. Returning to our underlying belief that inspiration and habit play an essential role in long-term change, Urbanski's charge under the auspices of the TA grant is to "paint the picture" and build a more broadly held understanding of what's possible in the Living Contract model. Our hope is that shared understanding will grow into shared commitment, readying our communities for direct implementation work to evolve negotiating practices.

Resource Allocation: While the path to fundamentally changing patterns in resource allocation is still somewhat gray, Implementation Teams will work in concert with administrators and board members to explore, evaluate and implement alternative scenarios. Already our districts are indicating a willingness to invest in the new system proposed by this initiative.

Progress Indicator: In Burlington, the acquisition of sufficient internet-capable devices to go 1:1 only gets us partway there. The building infrastructure and wiring will require significant improvements to support school-wide 1:1 by 2016. Administrators, the IT Director and the school board have each agreed to this goal, and in October committed \$140,000 toward Year 1 and intend to assume an *increasing* portion of the technology total in Years 2 and 3.

The DLSC initiative has supported our schools both in creating bold visions and in deciding that they are actually possible to achieve. The momentum and demonstrations inherent in this grant-funded work will make it easier and more politically important for administrators and board members to craft and gain support for budgets that align with student-centered, technology-rich learning goals.

### **Policy to Support Student-Centered Learning**

Educators in Vermont are in a unique position of having no state-level policy barriers to major student centered learning reforms. No waiver is required to implement proficiency-based graduation requirements and, in the state-level vision articulated in *Transformation of Education In Vermont (2008)*, educators are encouraged to move toward personalized learning, and proficiency-based grading, promotion and graduation requirements.<sup>lxx</sup> The state is also actively tackling federal-level barriers, and in December will apply for a No Child Left Behind waiver (see Appendix H).<sup>lxxi</sup>

Our local policy work (overseen, developed and implemented by our Implementation Teams in partnership with school administrators) aligns with the *Final Report of Policy Recommendations (2009)* of the *Education Transformation Policy Commission*, and will initially focus on:

- Proficiency-based credit and graduation system (replacing old policy with new policy; school-level policy work with district endorsement)

- Personalized Learning Plans (new school-level policy) attached to college & career readiness (needs redefining at the school-level; identified state-level standard/policy gap)<sup>lxxii</sup>
- Learning in non-school settings (building on and expanding existing policy)<sup>lxxiii</sup>

We further see an opportunity to continue participating in state-level policy conversations, as we function as a proving ground for the directions set in our state *Transformation* documents.

## CONCLUSION

*“People are hungry for change. The need is there.” – A Teacher*<sup>lxxiv</sup>

While it seems like there should be a lot to say at the conclusion of a document like this one, there’s really only one thing that matters: we are ready. We have designed the Implementation Plan that our learners, educators, families and communities have asked for, and that we know will carry this work from concept to reality. Momentum is strong. It’s time to get to work.

## End Notes

i Parent quote, Steering Committee Retreat. October 13, 2011.

ii We define “system” as the inside and outside structures, policies and processes that shape the learning experiences of our students.

iii Including the four **BHS** Common Priorities to support all students in learning at high levels: A “guaranteed curriculum” for all students constructed of rigorous and aligned core proficiencies with expected progress measured by common performance assessments; “Collaborative teacher practices” that ensure teachers observe and share best practices, develop and improve units of study aligned with the core proficiencies, and analyze and adjust instruction based on common performance assessment results; A “tiered system of student interventions” for students who need more support to learn or who are ready to learn more; A planned transition to personalized and student-centered “innovative programs and practices” that offer distinctive and engaging opportunities for learning. **WHS** - We are a Tier I High School in the process of transforming the way we educate our students. We believe that it is our mission to continually challenge students to develop as responsible citizens. We are also committed to living the Winooski School District Mission of ensuring student growth through continual improvement. We are actively engaged in the work of moving toward a standards-based assessment and reporting system for all of our students. Our first steps over the past year were mapping our curriculum 9-12; ensuring that effective writing instruction occurs across the curriculum, and through implementing an effective local writing assessment. We will be expanding our local assessment in targeted areas in the coming year to specifically identify student strengths and areas of growth. This will be reported to the public quarterly. (see goals and action plan at [www.winooski.k12.vt.us](http://www.winooski.k12.vt.us))

iv See our Research Basis (Appendix A) and References/Bibliography.

v Current Steering Committee Members: Dan Balon, Director of Diversity and Equity for the Burlington School District; Justin Brown, Winooski High School Principal; Julie Cadwalleader-Staub, BSD Grants Director; Jeanne Collins, Burlington Superintendent; Lauren Curry, Director of the Tarrant Foundation; Garang Deng, New Americans Specialist; Kyle Dodson, Director of Community Service and Civic Engagement at Champlain College; John Downes, Associate Director of the Tarrant Institute at the University of Vermont; Frank Gerdeman, Deputy Regional Manager at Vermont Adult Learning; Mary Martineau, Winooski Superintendent; Peter McConville, Burlington High School Teacher; Amy Mellencamp, Burlington High School Principal; Dawn Moskowitz, Community Organizer; Rich Tulikangas, Director of Linking Learning to Life; Linda Walslaben, Burlington ELL Director; Matt Webb, Winooski High School Teacher

vi Research Citation: Renee, M. & McAlister, S. *The Strengths and Challenges of Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy*. Annenberg Institute on School Reform at Brown University (January 2011). Local Context Citation: Burlington Magnet Schools Initiative.

vii Teacher quote: Steering Committee, September 22, 2011.

viii See our Research Basis (Appendix A)

ix Research Citations: Davies, C. and Spencer, D. “Research and development to support the next stage of the Harnessing Technology Strategy: The Learner and their Context - Narrowing Gaps and Supporting the Vulnerable.” University of Oxford Department of Education (March 2010); Tomlinson, C. A. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Local Context Citation: Perspectives expressed in numerous interviews and community conversations with parents and students, including New American (four community meetings) and historically marginalized families (six 1:1 interviews).

x This work will be accomplished in coordination with our Lead Community Partner, continuing our very effective working relationship to date.

xi Quote from a Steering Committee member.

xii Student Interview: June 2, 2011 (Individual).

xiii A ubiquitous theme revealed in our student interviews, including a small group of students who estimated that 60-95% of schooling “was just spending time in this institution”. Student Interview: September 27, 2011 (small group).

xiv Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education; Statewide Student-Centered, Technology-Rich Learning Initiative Findings.

xv Research-based framework employed by the Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education at the University of Vermont.

xvi Wei, R.C., Darling-Hammond, L., Andree, A., Richardson, N., and Orphanos, S. (2009). *Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the United States and Abroad*. Dallas: TX: School Redesign Network and National Staff Development Council. (Pages 3-4)

xvii Appendix E reflects preliminary planning conversations related to these pathways.

xviii Including two BHS students and one faculty advisor who were recently trained in various facilitation protocols by Daniel Baron of the School Reform Initiative.

xix Including planning for the upcoming 2012 Burlington/Winooski Appreciative Inquiry Summit.

xx E.g. the work of our planning team in the last 18 months, professional learning communities in the schools, and the family-school partnership teams.

xxi Project for School Innovation: [www.psinnovation.org](http://www.psinnovation.org).

xxii David, Jane L. “Collaborative Inquiry.” *Educational Leadership – Data: Now What?* Volume 66, Number 4. December 2008/January 2009. (Pages 87-88)

xxiii [www.uvm.edu/~cpar](http://www.uvm.edu/~cpar)

xxiv Wadsworth, Yolanda. 1998. *What is Participatory Action Research?* Action Research International, Paper 2.

xxv Mitra, 2009; Fletcher, 2010.

xxvi Student Interview: October 4, 2011 (Individual).

xxvii The Transformation of Education in Vermont: *A Framework for Transformation from the Vermont State Board of Education*. [http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdffdoc/dept/transformation/transformation\\_080108.pdf](http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdffdoc/dept/transformation/transformation_080108.pdf)

xxviii [http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdffdoc/pgm\\_curriculum/common\\_core/educ\\_curr\\_cc\\_state\\_standards\\_info.pdf](http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdffdoc/pgm_curriculum/common_core/educ_curr_cc_state_standards_info.pdf)

xxix Although Vermont currently has no college and career readiness standard.

xxx <http://sites.google.com/site/commoncoreinvermont/home>

xxxix Supporting Research: Easton, L.B. (2008). *Powerful designs for professional learning*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

xxxix Supporting Research: Schlechty, P.C. (2011).

xxxix Supporting Research: Achieve. (2004). *Ready or not: Creating a high school diploma that counts*. Washington, DC.

xxxix Supporting Research: Kreider, H., Caspe, M., Kennedy, S., Weiss, H. (2007). *Family Involvement in Middle and High School Students' Education*. (Family Involvement Makes A Difference Series, Vol. 3). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

xxxix Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning. *Including At-Risk Students in Standards-Based Reform: A Report on McREL's Diversity Roundtable II (1999)*  
[http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/Diversity/50071R\\_DiversityRT2.pdf](http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/Diversity/50071R_DiversityRT2.pdf)

xxxix Franzak, J. (2006). Zoom: A Review of the Literature on Marginalized Adolescent Readers, Literacy Theory, and Policy Implications. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(2), 209-248.

xxxix Chin-Yuan Sun, J. "The Digital Divide and Its Impact on Academic Performance." Rossier School of Education & Davis School of Gerontology University of Southern California.  
<http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/WRC08034.pdf>.

xxxix Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. (2000). *Family and Community Involvement: Reaching Out to Diverse Populations*.

xxxix e.g., Brophy, J. (1987). Synthesis of research on strategies for motivating students to learn. *Educational Leadership*, 45(2), 40-48.

xl Hmelo, C., Gotterer, G., & Bransford, J. (2004). Problem-based learning: What and how do students learn? *Educational Psychology Review*, 16(1), 235-266.

xli Lambert, N., & McCombs, B. (Eds.). (1998). *How students learn: Reforming schools through learner-centered education*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

xlii Rosenfeld, M., & Rosenfeld, S. (2008). Developing effective teacher beliefs about learners: The role of sensitizing teachers to individual learning differences. *Educational Psychology*, 28(3), 245-272.

xliii Performance based assessment scheme includes students conducting labs, completing fitness tests, compiling portfolios of work, presenting and performing to class and school audiences, writing and publishing, along with other varied methods of documenting what students know and are able to do. Formal assessments include the EXPLORE (9<sup>th</sup>), the PLAN (10<sup>th</sup>), the PSAT (11<sup>th</sup>), Advanced Placement (11/12<sup>th</sup>), and the ACT/SAT (11/12<sup>th</sup>) in order to compare and corroborate student learning against national norms.

xliv Administrator Quote: October 20, 2011.

xlvi See Attachment G, Burlington Free Press, *Burlington/Winooski Forum Considers Changes to Schools* by Molly Walsh (October 6, 2011).

xlvi Community Forum Notes: October 5, 2011 (Large Group).

xlvi Teacher Interview: October 3, 2011 (Individual).

xlvi Teacher Interview: October 3, 2011 (Individual).

xlvi Raubvogel, Graham. *I Dwell in Possibility*. <http://vimeo.com/19418778>

lvii Student Interview: September 27, 2011 (Small Group).

lviii Community Forum Summary: October 5, 2011 (Large Group).

lix Burundi Community Leader Discussion: August 11, 2011 (Small Group).

lxi Somali-Bantu Community Discussion: May 8, 2011 (Large Group).

lxii We recognize that it will not be possible for everyone to make this leap. In describing this reality, one teacher said, "If you really are providing people the opportunity to do great work and they aren't taking advantage of it, then there needs to be a way to alert them to that and it needs to be an expectation. And what will happen is that you will get some turnover and you will eventually create a totally inspired faculty." Teacher Interview: October 3, 2011 (Individual).

lxiii PLC topics include family-school partnership teams, brain-based research, and technology integration.

lxiv Teacher quote, Work Group: October 14, 2011.

lxv Raubvogel, Graham. *I Dwell in Possibility*. <http://vimeo.com/19418778>

lxvi Vice President of the Winooski Education Association

lxvii See Attachment G.

lxviii Student Interview: April 19, 2011 (Individual.)

lxix The Community-Based Partnerships and Family-School Partnerships Fellows.

lxx Fruchter, Norm. "Challenging Failing Schools" *National Housing Institute: Shelterforce Online*. July/August 2001.

lxxi *Ibid*.

lxxii Including a series of three large group meetings with members of four different New American communities; a parallel leadership meeting between elected New American representatives and school officials; two daylong stakeholder retreats; and the October 5 Community Forum. Each event included significant outreach, used meeting locations and times that supported participation (including several Saturday meetings), and offered appropriate food, childcare and transportation.

lxxiii One teacher described the current state of this work saying, "We often have people in the community saying we want to get into schools, but we hear that second hand. The avenues are non-existent or they are a maze. In order to do that you quadruple the amount of work you have to do. We just don't have that time in the day. It grinds people down." Teacher Interview: October 3, 2011. (Individual)

lxxiv Student Interview: June 2, 2011 (Individual).

lxxv <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Burlington-and-Winooski-Schools-Partnering-for-Change/180169428727994>

lxviii A current NMEF-funded position.

lxix Teacher Quote, Work Group: October 14, 2011.

lxx [http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdffdoc/dept/transformation/transformation\\_080108.pdf](http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdffdoc/dept/transformation/transformation_080108.pdf)

lxxi See Appendix H.

lxxii Despite the Common Core's framing of essential skills in the context of College and Career Readiness, Vermont does not currently have a College and Career Readiness Standard. This may present a specific opportunity for the Burlington and Winooski work to inform state-level policy.

lxxiii Winooski is currently a "closed" campus. That policy will need to change to support students working regularly in community-based settings.

lxxiv Teacher Interview: May 5, 2011 (Individual).