

The Maine View

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The Mountain School at Winhall

How a Small New England Community Saved its School by Closing it.

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Tucked into the hills of southern Vermont lies the small village of Winhall. Strung along Route 30 at the entrance to the Stratton Mountain ski area, this community of 700 is outwardly little different than the countless small towns that dot the landscape of rural New England. Yet a decade ago, the town of Winhall thrust itself into prominence by undertaking a novel act of educational reform. In response to a failing school and a new state law that threatened to drive property taxes to historic heights, the town voted to close its public K-8 school and reopen it as a private school.

Today, ten years later, the school at Winhall has twice the enrollment that it had before becoming private. In hallways that wind between multi-age classrooms, the school's 65 students make their way from an innovative integrated arts program featuring local artists to the school's unique Pre-K to 8th grade Spanish language program, something almost unheard of in a school of this size. Every Wednesday, the entire school, students and staff alike, gather in one room to do character education and team building activities. The students study conflict resolution and have donated hundred of hours of community service and raised thousands of dollars for charity as part of an ongoing civic engagement program.

The school's academic performance has seen dramatic gains as well. Eighty-nine percent of the school's students scored at or above grade level on the most recent New England Common Assessment Program, 22 percent higher than the average for the state Vermont, which routinely ranks among the highest performing states in nationally standardized tests. This achievement comes despite the fact that over half of the school's students are Title 1 eligible and one in five qualifies for special education services.

The cost for this level of achievement? Incredibly, the Winhall community spends less per-pupil today than it did before going private a decade ago. Having more control of curriculum and programming has allowed the school to maximize its educational dollar to the extent that even today yearly spending grows at a rate well below the state average.

As towns in Maine struggle to comply with a school district consolidation mandate that threatens the state's smallest districts, school and community leaders are looking for alternatives. Could privatizing a public school be a solution?

Findings:

- The privatization of the Winhall school was driven by declining student achievement and a new Vermont law that threatened the community with significant tax increases. Privatization resulted in a much better school at a lower cost to taxpayers.
- Privatization required visionary leadership, a plan that had widespread appeal, and extensive support from the community. Today, the resulting success of the school at Winhall shows the power of the independent-school model.
- Because Maine has a similar tuitioning program and a long tradition of publicly-funded independent schools, privatization of the sort found at Winhall may be an option worth exploring for Maine's small communities and school districts.

Background

To hear community members tell it, the town of Winhall found itself in the late 1990's with a "terrible" school system, despite spending more per student than almost any school district in the state. "TV Fridays" and other acts of educational malpractice had evidently become common enough that parents were pulling their children out of the school. Enrollment levels and achievement test scores were both plummeting.

As bad as that was, worse news came in 1996, when the Vermont legislature enacted a new school funding provision known as Act 60. The new law sought to equalize educational spending across Vermont in response to a supreme court ruling that the state's school financing system was unconstitutionally biased in favor of wealthier towns. Act 60 created a statewide property tax commitment to education, and redistributed school funding from wealthier towns to less affluent ones using a funding mechanism known as the "sharing pool." For residents of Winhall, with its ski-resort wealth, the new law meant paying more than ever for what many residents considered to be a failing school.

The prospect of an unprecedented property hike drove the town to study its options, which were few. School leaders looked at school consolidation, but found a chilly reception from the town's less wealthy neighbors, who were scared off by the prospect of losing school funding under Act 60. Residents considered closing the school outright and sending the students to neighboring schools, but faced the prospect bussing children great distances. In addition, closing the school would have meant repaying the state the millions of dollars it had invested in the town's school building. Drastic cuts to the school budget, which would have resulted larger classes and the elimination of programs, were also considered and promptly ruled out. Clearly, some kind of new and different approach was needed.

Working with an educational consultant, the town eventually hit on the idea of converting the school from public to private. In theory, the concept had a number of advantages. First, a private school could be financed in part by some kind of private foundation, which would allow the town to lower its per-pupil rates to the state average and thus avoid state-mandated property-tax contributions to the sharing pool. Second, because the building would remain a school, the town avoided reimbursing the state for its funding of past construction work that had been done there. Third, closing the school would invalidate existing teacher contracts, allowing the town to finally force out the teachers that many felt were at the root of the school's underperformance. Last and perhaps most importantly, as it would turn out, going private gave the school a degree of edu-

cational independence that would become enviable in the years to come.

Going Private

Supporters of the seemingly unprecedented privatization idea began work to develop it into a concrete proposal to go before voters. With an consultant developing the curriculum, plan backers set about designing a governance and funding model that would allow for better accountability and lower costs. The challenge was to create a school that was truly private, but which remained under local community control and allowed the town to satisfy its legal obligation to provide a free and appropriate public education.

To solve the governance issue, the architects of the proposal designed a system of twin governing boards, one private and one public. The school itself would be managed as a public-benefit non-profit corporation, governed by a private board of trustees. The publicly-elected school board would oversee transportation and special education matters, but otherwise have no say in the management of the school itself. In exchange for the use of the town's school building, the new school would be obligated to accept every student from Winhall and neighboring Stratton, but would be free to accept students from outside the area as well.

To pay for all this, the community would make use of Vermont's generations-old town tuitioning program which, like Maine's, allows towns without schools to tuition students to schools of their choice. The plan that was developed allowed the school to set a tuition rate, which was then submitted to the public school board and put before voters. If approved, that per-pupil tuition amount was paid to the new school on behalf of the town's students. The public school board would calculate costs for special education and transportation services and bring those costs before voters as well.

The school building itself would remain the property of the of the public school system, but would be leased to the town, which, in turn, would lease it to the school. As part of the agreement, the school building was also to be used as a community center, guaranteeing public access and use.

So, as it went before voters in the spring of 1998, the plan called for all the students in the two towns to be educated, at public expense, at a private school occupying space in a publicly-owned building. The public school system would bus students to and from the school and oversee special education services, but otherwise have no say over the management of the school. In exchange, the private school agreed to accept all students in the two towns who chose to go there.

The proposal, which had been developed with a good deal of community input, went before voters and was approved at the annual town meeting in June of 1998.



Problems and Solutions

As complicated as the plan seemed on paper, making it happen in reality proved even tougher. The public school board and the trustees of the soon-to-be private school, who were appointed soon after the town meeting vote, were immediately faced with a series of challenges.

First was the issue of what to do with the existing five-person teaching staff at the school. The trustees of the new private school had little interest in retaining any of the existing faculty, but there was concern that the whole privatization plan could be sunk by a protracted legal dispute with the teachers, who were still under continuing contract with the town. In response, the town agreed to offer the existing public school staff a “substantial” severance package, which they agreed to accept. The trustees then undertook an aggressive campaign to attract new staff and spent the summer interviewing and hiring new teachers.

The trustees of what by then had become known as the Mountain School at Winhall were also facing the challenge of financing the startup of the new school. Per-student public funding would come in the fall, well after school had started, but the trustees needed money right away to hire staff and get the school operational.

The funding solution came with the creation of the Stratton-Winhall Education Foundation. Led by area parents and Mountain School supporters, the Foundation undertook an aggressive fundraising campaign, including community events and appeal letters.

They were helped immeasurably by the state’s passage of Act 60, which forced higher-spending communities like Winhall to contribute to the state’s school-funding sharing pool. The effect of this on towns like Winhall was to put into place a form of double taxation. Winhall not only spent a good deal on its own schools, it had to contribute mightily to the state sharing pool as well.

The town could avoid contributing to the sharing pool, though, if its per-pupil spending was brought down to the state average. Backers of the Stratton-Winhall Foundation were thus provided with an easy pitch to make to potential contributors who owned the high-dollar second homes on the edge of Stratton Moun-

tain. If the Foundation was able to provide enough private funding to the Mountain School, the school could keep the tuition rate it charged to the town at or below the state average, meaning no contributions to the sharing pool, and far lower property taxes as a result.

It worked like a charm. The school was able to raise enough funding to get itself off the ground, and was able to go to Winhall voters with a request for tuition payments of little more than \$7000 per student, far less than over \$12,000 per-pupil that the school had been spending prior to privatization. The Foundation provided the rest of the funding to the school, generated property tax savings for the whole town, and provided its financial backers with a tax deduction as well.

An educational program for the school was developed by consultants, and with space, staffing, and funding all in place, the last hurdle to be overcome by the new school was winning state approval. Because the school was to be funded primarily through public dollars under the town tuitioning program a number of state requirements applied. Working with the state, the local supervisory school union, and community members, the school won interim approval from the state to open that fall, just months after the community’s decision to close its public school and go private.

After a successful first year, the Mountain School was granted a standard three year independent school approval by the state. By that next fall, the start of the school’s second year of operation, it was already welcoming students from outside the area. The school’s enrollment continued to climb in the years to follow, to be today about twice what it was ten years ago.

Making it happen

Observers say there were a few necessary ingredients that made the privatization process successful, without which it might not have happened.

The first necessary ingredient was widespread community support for the idea, which was generated primarily by the passage of Act 60. Facing the prospect of crippling property tax increases, the community was open to bold new ideas. This was especially so given the lack of feasible alternatives, such as closure or consolidation. Furthermore, the idea of privatization had broad appeal. For families with children, the prospect of a much better and more accountable school was highly attractive, while the property tax savings generated by the school’s new funding mechanism had appeal to those in the community without children in the system. It seemed like a win for everyone.

The second component, according to community members, was establishing a way to finance the new school in those early months of its operation before public per-pupil dollars were made available. The creation of the Winhall-Stratton Educa-

tional Foundation was a key step, as was the help of the Freeman Foundation, a Vermont-based charitable organization that developed as a result of the general uproar over Act 60, and which provided sizable matching-fund grants to help projects such as the Winhall privatization effort get underway.

Observers also insist that leadership was a key element as well. Advancing so radical and unprecedented an idea as privatizing a public school required people who could both visualize how the process would unfold and then sell the concept to the community. According to those involved, the months-long process of privatizing the school required weekly and sometimes daily meetings of the trustees, the school board, and members of the community. Supporters of the concept conducted community surveys and town hall meetings, and visited countless private and public schools in order to develop a fully realized vision of how the new school would operate. Without the work of these dedicated citizens, the project could not possibly have been completed.

The Mountain School today

Their work paid off. Today, the Mountain School enjoys double the enrollment it had a decade ago. Though the majority of its students still come from Winhall and Stratton, about 15 percent of the students at the school come from other areas, with families paying private tuition so their children can attend. On measures of student achievement, the Mountain School's student body well exceeds state and national averages, and the school is in the process of winning full accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

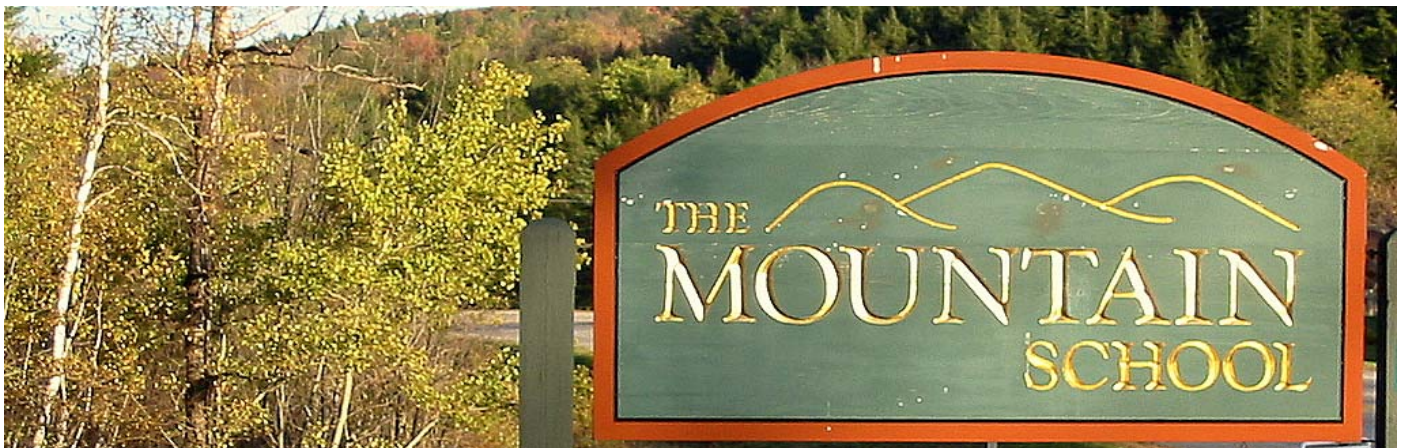
When asked to explain the success that the Mountain School has exhibited in the years since privatization, current Head of School Darren Houck attributes it to one factor above all: choice. While the term "choice," when applied to education today, generally means having the ability to choose the school a child will attend, choice pervades the Mountain School in many ways in addition to the choice students make to go there.

The Mountain School enjoys far greater choice over their curriculum, for instance. As a private school, the Mountain School is not bound by the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* or by any state-mandated curriculum. The school follows the state's grade level expectations for achievement, to ensure that graduating eighth graders are on par with their public school peers, but the school has a choice about how it reaches those levels of achievement. Houck claims that this allows the school to develop a curriculum that is "teacher centered, student driven, and community supported." This curriculum, and the freedom his staff has to develop it, Houck feels, is the single biggest factor explaining the school's success.

The school also enjoys more choice over how it spends its funding dollars. The freedom from many state and federal educational mandates allows the school to focus its resources on the programming that best fits the school's philosophy. This freedom had resulted in extensive investments in an interdisciplinary arts and technology program that makes use of a mobile laptop computing lab, for instance. Observers feel such programs would be impossible for so small a school were it forced to spend money the way the public schools do.

Parental choice is another key factor. The decision to send a child to the Mountain School also means a choice by parents to involve themselves in the school to a degree rarely found in traditional public schools. Parents make up about a third of the Mountain School Board of Trustees, and also serve on a parental advisory board which meets monthly to discuss school improvement issues. Parents are a part of hiring committees and are involved in curriculum development. Indeed, parents sign a "responsibility statement" that outlines what is expected of them in exchange for becoming a part of the Mountain School community.

The Mountain School's staff has choices as well. As a private school, the Mountain School struggles to remain competitive on salaries and benefits with its public school neighbors. Teachers at the school are not protected by exhaustive union-negotiated contracts either. Staff members choose to go to the



school regardless, because it offers small class sizes and a level of classroom independence and autonomy that most public school teachers would envy.

Challenges ahead

Choice is a double-edge sword, however. Students in Winhall and Stratton are guaranteed enrollment at the Mountain School, but some choose to attend neighboring public or private schools instead, and can do so with the two towns paying at least part of the bill with public dollars. Because neighboring towns do not tuition their K-8 students, families from outside the two-town community must pay tuition to attend. Though scholarships to the school are readily available, the cost of attending the school can be prohibitive for many families living outside the two towns. The state has not helped the matter any. In an attempt to discourage the kind of private support for public schools that was provided by the Winhall-Stratton Educational Foundation, the state of Vermont amended Act 60, with the result that the Foundation has largely become defunct. Today, the school actively engages parents and community members in ongoing efforts to raise funds to make up the difference. The Mountain School is also confronting future enrollment declines, as young families are being priced out of the Winhall area's costly real estate market.

For Head of School Darren Houck, these challenges and others are simply part of what it means to be a private school. He believes, though, that being a great school can solve most problems. The Mountain School, he says "simply needs to be better than the schools next door." It is an challenge he welcomes.

In a few short years, the Mountain School at Winhall has become a model independent school, visited regularly by those interested in the changes they've made. Could such a school be a model for Maine?

Implications for Maine

If there is a state where public school privatization might work, it is Maine. Like Vermont, Maine has a town tuitioning program that allows communities without their own schools to send students to private schools using public dollars. Maine also has a rich history of private schools. The state's venerable Town Academies have been providing educations to public school students since the 19th century. The state has a fairly straightforward process for approving public schools, and allows accreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges to serve as de facto state approval for an independent school.

At the end of August, The Maine Heritage Policy Center produced a report, entitled *Saving Our Schools: Is Privatization an Option*, which outlined how privatization might be done under existing state law. The Winhall experience, though, sheds additional light on the keys to the successful privatization of a pub-

lic school, and some of the additional challenges to be overcome.

- **Community support is critical.** The privatization movement at Winhall began as a revolt against a new state law that threatened the viability of the school. Supporters of the privatization effort were able to turn community discontent with the law into action. Task forces were empaneled, town hall meetings were conducted, and the entire movement to privatize the school became very much a community effort. Maine's current district consolidation mandate, which threatens Maine's smallest schools, has the potential to be just such a motivating force. A well-crafted privatization movement would be able to capitalize on widespread unhappiness with the new state law, and turn that into support for privatization.
- **A privatization plan needs to be broadly appealing.** Because the Winhall privatization plan improved the quality of the school and also cut property taxes, it was supported by young families with children as well as by those with little interest in the school itself. Indeed, because many of the taxpayers in Winhall owned second homes there, the privatization plan needed support from people who didn't even live in the town year-round. A successful privatization proposal, therefore, will need to offer something to everyone. The plan needs to not only create a better school, but a school that is more accountable and less expensive. A plan that appeals to young families as well as people like retirees stands the best chance of being broadly supported.
- **Privatization requires visionary leadership.** Though Winhall faced a unique situation in which privatization was really the only option, actually taking the seemingly unprecedented step of closing the public school and replacing it with a private one required leaders with the vision to see what the school could be, and who had the ability to make others see that vision as well. Those with experience in public school reform know how hard even the most basic changes are to make, but an undertaking of this magnitude requires a very devoted and talented group of people that can not only develop a feasible plan, but can work with community members, the school leadership, and the state and other officials to make it happen. Often times, the people with the ideas and the people who can make things happen are not the same people. A project as complex and controversial as this has the potential of being needs both.
- **Financial support is a crucial element.** Private schools cost a lot of money to start and run. In Winhall, the looming prospect of massive property tax increases was used to encourage support for a private foundation that helped fund the startup of the new school. Securing financial sup-

port for such an undertaking is as critical as developing political support. At least one school system in Maine that has been studying the privatization option has investigated becoming a “satellite” campus of an existing private school, an action which provides not only an existing and state-approved school program but significant financial resources and the opportunity to minimize startup costs.

- **A compelling case for change must be at the heart of the plan.** Though the property tax issue was a major force behind the privatization effort, Winhall also needed a much better school. Privatization seemed the most effective way to achieve that. For a community to support so profound a change in the way it educates its young people, the case must be made that needed change simply cannot be made within the existing public school model. Today’s public schools, which at once seem both archaic and bureaucratically rigid, often prove impossible to reform in any meaningful way. Educational freedom, though fraught with challenges of its own, may be the only way

for small, community-centered schools to remain sustainable in an era of “big-box” stores and “big-box” schools. Such a case for fundamental, systemic change has to accompany so bold a reform effort as privatization.

Conclusion

In Maine today, as in Vermont a decade ago, legislation enacted by a distant state legislature threatens the small schools and small school districts that are often the heart of the rural communities they serve. The people of Winhall made a bold choice in response to the danger, and found an imaginative solution that saved their school and made it better.

In so doing, they may have provided the small towns of Maine, who now face similar dangers, with a model for how to not only save a small school, but to fundamentally change it, using the power of choice to build, in remote community, a 21st-century school to rival those found anywhere else in the state.

Sources:

- [1] Author interviews with Darren Houck, MSW Head of School; Maggie Weaver, Winhall School Board; Rudy Weaver, former MSW Board Chair.
- [2] Bowen, Stephen, *Saving our Small Schools: Is privatization an option?* Maine Heritage Policy Center, 2007.
- [3] Hirschfeld, Peter, *Public school studies option of going private*, The Barre Montpelier Times Argus, April 1, 2007.
- [4] *How to Privatize a Public School in Vermont: A Layman’s Guide*, Vermonters for Better Education, 2000.
- [5] The Mountain School at Winhall webpage, <http://www.themountainschool.org/pages/index>.

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