

## The Prospect Review - October 2006

**Making and Remaking Schools**  
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My name is Jessica Howard and I am the founding principal and teacher of a small school in southern Vermont. Sort of sounds familiar, doesn't it? It is called the Hiland Hall School. Hiland Hall was a governor of Vermont in 1860 and I really like him. When Prospect School closed in 1991 and some of us wanted to open another school, I decided to name the school after Hiland Hall so I can talk about him sometimes. But not today.

We've been a school since 1991. When I say small, I mean really small, 27 children ages 5 to 14 and me and another teacher, and a LOT of other grownups about the building. When we started the school our mission was to join with families in the liberation of the full capacity of the children entrusted to us, intellectually, socially, emotionally, physically and aesthetically. And we try. What I want to share with you today is a little bit of the underpinnings of why we do what we do. It will be familiar to you. We founded ourselves on Prospect's understandings of what it is to be human. Then I want to tell you a little bit about how the day is structured, then two stories that illustrate the way a living organism grows and changes. As an independent school we are not subject to all the pressures and

difficulties that most of you are subject to. We don't have to do standardized testing. Our students leave us to go into high school (or earlier). The high schools pretty much accept our evaluation of how our students have done.

But it's not as if the school doesn't grow and change every day, every year, regardless of what pressures we do or don't have. I was thinking of something that both of my colleagues have said: The day the school doesn't change and the day I don't learn something is the day I retire. I've been teaching for 40 years now and I've never gone through a year that I didn't do something differently or a whole theme didn't emerge that was completely different. That's because the children are always different. If you are responding to the children then you are always making and remaking your school.

One of the deepest fundamentals of this institution (It used to be a proposition. It isn't a proposition any more; it is a fact to me; it is something utterly proven): that you can TRUST human beings to learn. YOU don't have to worry about whether they're learning. We come into the world thinking, able to think, able to question, able to explore, able to invent, able to make and do. So, I have time. My students have time. That's the gift we have as an independent school. I don't have to hurry. I have anywhere from five to eight years with my students. It's wonderful to be able to wait and it's wonderful to be able to know that they have

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time. They know they have time, too. I can trust them to be learning, and I can trust all of us adults to be learning, too.

On the other hand, there's an IF. You do your best work and you do your best learning if you are in a safe comfortable environment that allows you to take risks. To me, that "IF" side has to do with what human beings don't come into the world already knowing, which is how to be civilized. Civilized behavior is the behavior that you learned because you lived in the City, not in the Tribe. You didn't live in the tribe any more. You had to now not be with familiar others but with strange others, with the stranger in your midst, so you had to learn to make everybody safe. "Civil" comes from the Greek word for city. It's your city behaviors. That is different from group to group. That's culture. That's what you need to be very firmly teaching: good manners.

On the one hand I like to think of the school as offering my students as large an intellectual choice as I possibly can, and on the other, very strong standards for how we treat each other. Mutual respect, open-mindedness, acceptance: those are things that have to be articulated, laid out, taught, insisted on. And if you don't, you're IN TROUBLE. (What does "in trouble" mean? You have to go talk to Jessica!) The other issue with any school is, you have to interface with the culture. We're the bridge between the individual child and the rest of the world that is going to be their

world. We have obligations to teach certain fields of study, certain skills.

I want to give you a sense of what our day is like and what our space is like. We have school in a huge space, 50 feet by 100, plus a medium-sized addendum for our middle school group. It's not wide open. It's full of dividers that were there when we moved in. It was an old dress shop. The dividers are big wooden clothes racks. They're neat, quite tall; you can't see from one end of the space to the other. The space is divided into three or four large areas. There's a big block area, a sand table, two big open meeting spaces, and a really big open space at the far end where kids can do dramatic play and play games - it's quite lively. Our middle school space is also quite a big space, with all the kinds of things that you would need.

We sometimes run the whole school as a single group, all through the mornings. In the afternoons we split. Middle School has a set of programs of its own, and the elementary group also has a set of programs of its own.

We always start the day with a morning meeting. Everybody comes. Our parents often come; siblings often come. We start it in French, because French is the language we teach. We go, "Bonjour, mes amis." "Bonjour, Jessica." "Comment ca va?" Then we have news and treasures. I love the way the parents get into that. They also come to morning meeting

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when they have news to share or a treasure to share. It gets to be a nice large group.

Then we always, always have Activity Time. It's pretty sacrosanct. (Sometimes we do something called "flipping the day." If something interesting is happening in the morning or we need to do something, we have Activity Time in the afternoon.) Activity Time is the time when children have maximum choice of the things they'd like to do, when they carry out big projects. The baseline materials are always there: sand, paint, blocks, sewing, beading, yarn, big blocks, dramatic play, drawing....

At the end of Activity Time we have snack, and then we have a half an hour of what we call Quiet Reading, which is when I teach reading, if I need to. At that period a lot of other things happen which are all around reading.

Then the last third of the morning alternates between French and math (twice a week we do French, three times a week we do math). We split the children into different kinds of groupings for both of those two activities. I have a lot of people who come in at the end of the morning to help out with the math program. It's a very labor-intensive time of the day.

Then we have lunch and outside time, a very important time, as you all know. Very elaborate rituals around lunch have emerged, like who gets to use the microwave and

how do we choose the game to play outside, and whose birthday is it. Birthdays have also become a fairly elaborate ritual -- so interesting how things change!

The afternoon period is split between a whole variety of activities, what I think of as studies and content material - spelling, writing and drawing, geography, or whatever we're studying. I as the teacher have chosen a strand for this year that I'm calling Explorers, which I picked because of some questions that got raised last year. The children also all choose things to study.

The end of the day is clean-up, and both groups read aloud. Middle School has their read aloud and I read aloud to my guys. The day ends at quarter to three.

We do field trips. They're harder than they used to be. We have to get cars. The changing standards around car seats have made this very difficult. We do interrupt our day for other kinds of activities. We have a lot of people who come in and out and offer different kinds of support at different times.

We do narrative assessments of our students. We write parent reports twice a year. Those are major productions. It's a major source of staff development. We keep narrative records every week. Twice a year we write narrative reports to our families about students' progress. It's not that we don't evaluate. Of course we evaluate. But we do it based on our

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observations of the children's work as well as our observations of the students' activities in class. Those parent reports, which are often two-and-a-half pages single-spaced, typed, become treasured artifacts for families. They hang onto them. I've had families come back to say their children who are now 30 or 35 still read those parent reports and still are astounded to recognize themselves in the reports. Even when you're writing about a 5- or 6-year-old, people are themselves. People are continuous with themselves, and it's astounding how much you can tell.

I want to tell a story about something we call Independent Studies. It illustrates how things change and how they stay the same. We have this expectation that students will do what we call Independent Studies. That doesn't mean that they do them by themselves. It means that the topic that they picked is independent of any other topic we happen to be studying. It emerged as a specific, laid-out, expected way to do things, out of some earlier work that we did. If we were studying something like Animals, everybody would pick an animal they were interested in and do independent work on that animal. One year I just said, "Well, what would you like to study?" They all picked different things. It's very complicated to do. Kids pick topics for which there is no appropriate material for their age. But if you've offered this to them, you have to give it to them. So then you have to go find material and a grownup to read it and to

help them figure out how to absorb what they're doing and to do a project, do some way of saying back to you what they've learned, and presenting to their colleagues. Well, it was very popular. I didn't even bother to start with a theme. "What are you all going to study?" What's interesting is, they make their choices, then you as the teacher have to find a way to weave them all together, which you can do. In the end everybody's learning about everybody's study. We set up an expectation that you would share, so that every two or three weeks you have a big go-round and people would indicate what new things they had discovered about their study. I used to chart it. Some years I do and some years I don't (depending on how busy I am). It isn't very tidy. Grownups like everything to fit together. It's nice when you can make a tree and you can show everybody studied Boats - you have this great tree and grownups come into your classroom and say, "Oh, that's cool!" But life isn't always like that, so Independent Studies are a little ragged. If you don't know what's going on, you come in and say, "Why is someone studying Volcanoes and someone else is studying Ancient Egypt. This doesn't make any sense. How on earth do you work it all together?"

Last year I made this dreadful mistake. The year before I realized we hadn't studied much about Native American cultures recently and they didn't understand that there was a major error in a publication we received. The State

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of Vermont sends us a nice little booklet about maple syrup making every year. It's full of cute little things, including a story that said probably maple syrup was discovered by the Iroquois. On the cover of this thing, there's a teepee. I was appalled. I said to the kids, "What's wrong with this picture?" and they didn't know. So I thought, "Uh oh, next year I need to do some expansive work with Native American cultures." I thought, this is a big topic, they can pick their study from Native American studies. After all, there's a huge range. You can do foods, you can do clothing, you can do the history of a people. You can do all kinds of exciting things. They're polite kids. They were really nice about it. It was a serious error because they'd gotten so used to the world being theirs for their choice. They'd gotten so used to how wonderful it felt, to think about the range of choice -- you could study anything. They talked about it all summer, apparently. They would start planning in the previous May what they were going to study the next year.

So they did it, but it didn't have any pizzazz. One or two kids said they liked it because they often have trouble making that wide choice. They liked me narrowing it down for them. But most of them were really annoyed. I don't do that any more. I've gone back to the Teacher Choice strand and then they get to pick anything they like. Those studies are emerging. We don't usually pick them in September. We usually do some forms of other studies in September to get people

warmed up. They'll be well launched into their Independent Studies by December. We'll spend the rest of the year fiddling around with those in various ways. That's how something inadvertent that I started one year, the kids grabbed it. The more choice you give them, the more choice they want, and the more invested they are. That was what I noticed about the Native American Studies. They were great topics, but they didn't have that same investment and they didn't work with the same power as they will over the stuff they're going to be doing. Right now they are studying different countries that their forebears came from. They're also pretty invested in that. That grew out of something we did last year.

The other story is the Thanksgiving story. It goes way back to Prospect. I love thinking about it because I love knowing how far back a story can go and how an event that holds a community together can change and grow and keep shifting and yet always have its root back there somewhere in the beginning. A long time ago there was a teacher at Prospect named Ron L. He was teaching 5-to-7's and I was teaching East Group (7's to 9's or 10's). He was doing a unit on Pilgrims. In an effort to be activity-based, the last day of school he was cooking a few turkey legs in an electric fry pan he had at school. He opened a can of corn, and maybe somebody made a pie. Because of the way Prospect was set up, people were always traveling through each other's classrooms. There was no such

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thing as privacy. You could smell the turkey legs. This was an old house - the smells of things would go all the way up and down. My kids said to me, "Why can't we do that?" I said, "Well, we can. Just remind me next year." (The multiage grouping is absolutely another gift of time. You don't have to spend months and months trying to get to know your kids, and they don't have to spend months and months trying to get to know you. The new ones get tucked in like that [finger snap].) The next year they set out about it. Well, I'm a good cook, and we had a kitchen at school. I wasn't going to settle for a couple of turkey legs. We roasted a whole turkey and we made pies and we probably made stuffing. We had been doing other big lunches. We used to do East Group hot lunches and we would invite other people in the building to come to our events. So we did. By the third year, Allison's group joined in. We all did. (There was one Thanksgiving where the roads were horrible. We were afraid we weren't going to get there with the turkey.) By the time we'd gotten this event under way, it was feeding all the kids and all the staff in the building. We moved every table into the Big Room and set up this huge to-do, up to 75 or 80 people. Parents would come and help.

When we started Hiland Hall School we were tiny. It was 15 kids (12 families) and me. It was a wrench. We wanted to preserve as much of the continuity as we could. We got close to this time of year and we didn't have a kitchen yet. They

said, "How about it? Are we going to do our Thanksgiving dinner or not?" I said, "Well, sure," so we did. It was tiny. It was so different from the way it had been, but we did it. Somebody had to cook the turkey out of the building. We had to make the pies on Monday and they all had to go home uncooked and come back. It was quite a juggling act, but it was established as a really important community event. So it grew. We are back up to 80 people, but it's different. Obviously we don't have that number of children - we only have 27 children. What's happened is it's become a complete community-family event. Every child has at least one family member, if not two, three, or four. They invite their grandparents and cousins. The cooking has become astounding. We cook a turkey. Two other people cook turkeys. The kids cook pies, stuffing, mashed potatoes (and we use ricers - I have quite a collection of ricers now!), cranberry sauce. Parents bring side dishes. It's become, again, a tradition. People look forward to each other's dishes. We move every table in the school to the far end and set up this big U.

Another thing that has emerged has been the need for place cards. If you don't have place cards, kids clump, and it's not a clumping time, it's a time when we're having guests and we need to recognize we have guests, and also, parents want to sit with their kids. Over the years, the kids have laid claim to place cards as a chance to do the most incredible graphic work. The

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place cards are little and they are absolutely exquisite. It's amazing how traditions get started. I was thinking of that when Pat was talking about sewing. It's a culture. People now know, "Don't write the name in yellow. It will never show up." It used to be, middle school did the place cards and then the other kids grumbled, why couldn't they do theirs for their own families? Why not? So now we have this elaborate system which I don't have anything to do with - the kids do it. I have a lot of kids who can organize. They can take over the whole school, and they do, sometimes. They have this system set up so they go around and ask each person, "Are you doing yours? How many do you have? Who wants to do extras?" Then they apportion all the extras out so everybody has a fair turn to do the cards. The place setting has become a part of the tradition.

The other thing that's emerging: we now have a growing interest in middle school for doing extra cooking projects that are reflective of the vegetables native to America. It's fascinating to me to listen to parents talking about it. We have a huge family involvement at school. I'll bring it up, and then I'll hear people saying to new parents, "Oh, you have to come - this is an amazing event!" It is. We have to move every table and chair. We also have this fairly well-worn path now, of how this works. You can imagine the cleanup. Parents always think they should help. It's great if they wash dishes. But they have absolutely no idea of how to

put the classroom back together. They keep trying to do it, and I have to be very clear with them: "Don't Touch It." We have a system. The youngest kids clear the tables. The intermediate kids help with the food. And middle school puts the school back together. They can do it in 15 minutes. They know where every table goes, where every chair goes and how it's set up.

Schools make and remake themselves all the time over long periods of time. It's interesting to me that all three of these schools are at least 13, 14, 15 years old and are absolutely not the same as they were when they started. What stays the same is what's deep, the principles upon which you found yourself. What changes is how you go about it because you're paying attention all the time to the children. The children are taking it away from you whenever they can and making it themselves, and making it their event.