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EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Improving Schools *from Within*
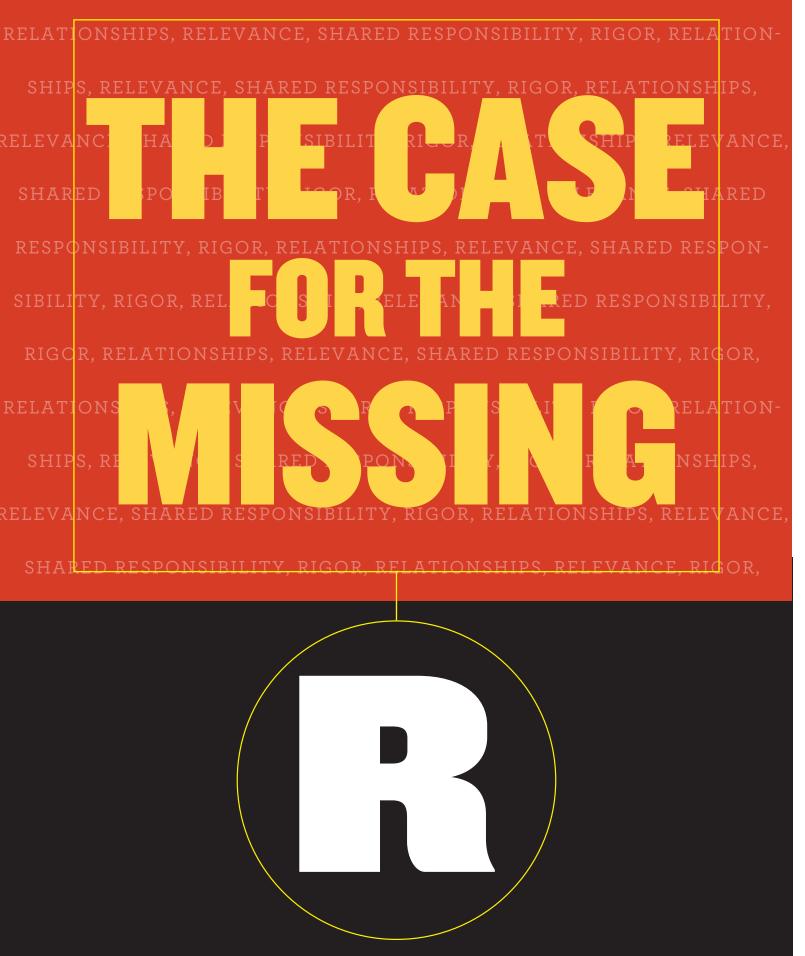
THE CASE FOR THE MISSING

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When students and teachers share responsibility for learning, growth in rigor, relevance, and relationships comes more easily.

Helen Beattie, Martha Rich, and Peter Evans

The principles of rigor, relevance, and relationships, commonly known as the "new three *R*s," have gained widespread acceptance as cornerstones for engaging learning. Originating with the assertion that "relevance makes rigor possible" (Daggett, 2008), the three dimensions soon became basic elements of the 21st century high school reform toolkit. Vermont's commissioner of education incorporated the new three *R*s as a statewide theme to improve education outcomes. Principals began to use them as a framework for improving schoolwide academic performance. Teachers now align lessons with the new three *R*s, finding that they both make sense and make a difference.

As some practitioners have applied these principles, however, they've discovered there's something missing. Various candidates for a "fourth *R*" have been proposed (Ginsberg, 2011; Johnson, 2001). Our experience with a network of Vermont high schools points clearly to the fact that full activation of rigor, relevance, and relationships requires shared responsibility.

Instructional practices that embrace this missing *R* will also enhance the other three dimensions. Instead of casting students as passive recipients of their education, a commitment to responsibility makes them co-creators who are actively engaged in the central dynamic of teaching and learning.

Up with Responsibility

For the past seven years, school teams in Vermont that are members of the organization UP for Learning (Unleashing the Power of Partnership for Learning) have focused on building youth-adult partnerships in the teaching-learning process. The fourth *R* emerged early when a student member of the planning team asked about our use of the term *partnership*: "Isn't it really all about students and teachers each taking responsibility? Isn't that the heart of the partnership thing?" We incorporated this idea into our initial guiding framework, setting up shared responsibility as a key variable equal to the other three *R*s. As they have put these four dimensions into action, the Vermont school teams have become ardent advocates for that final, missing *R*.

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Among the 20 schools that have participated in our action research network (Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together), applications of the four *R*s have varied widely. A few teams have focused first on redesigning traditional student governance, making it more substantive and inclusive while shifting away from student elections as the sole route to membership. Sharing responsibility also means getting students to the real decision-making tables: placing students on hiring committees, faculty leadership teams, strategic planning committees, and school boards. In one school, it was a matter of changing an adult-only "Youth Voice" group to one whose membership was predominantly youth.

Some schools set up new structures, such as one school's Breakfast Club, an early-morning open forum at which students and teachers can eat and talk freely about any school issue that concerns them. Another school set up a Principal's Advisory Committee of students and teachers to assist in making decisions about policy. In a third example, students began leading monthly Principal Round-tables to engage classmates in school decisions.

> "Effective learning depends on the learners' capacity to understand and self-regulate their own learning process."

Exploring Teaching and Learning Together

Although governance is an important arena for sharing responsibility in schools, the most important focus is the teaching-learning process itself. This is the area where thinking of four *R*s has yielded the most transformative work in the Vermont high school network. As students are invited into the formerly closed territory where teachers reflect on their practice, defining effectiveness in terms of rigor, relevance, relationships, and responsibility provides both common vocabulary and a fresh starting point for youth-adult teams. Students and teachers examine teaching and learning together through action research—collecting and analyzing data, sharing results in structured dialogue, and planning action steps.

Each school team has followed its own path in implementing action steps. A school still in the early stages of inquiry supplemented its student and faculty surveys with interviews on the question, "What makes a good school?" Interviews were recorded and edited into a fast-paced video used to introduce an assembly and set up further dialogue. Another team created an appreciation system for teachers who offer highly rigorous and relevant curriculums, have strong student-teacher relationships,

and incorporate shared responsibility. Another team took a lead role in designing and implementing a schoolwide spring thematic unit, working to identify content that would embody the four *R*s. At another site, the youth-adult team led faculty to examine the efficacy of mid-year exams; the discovery that neither students nor teachers found them an adequate measure of learning prompted a redesign of the assessment process.

These examples indicate the range of forms shared responsibility can take, but a more detailed account of one school's experience over time will show its depth. At a regional high school in central Vermont, a team of students and teachers began a cycle of schoolwide quantitative research seven years ago. Following our action research model, teams gathered data on the four variables from both students and teachers. They then brought results to the student body, the faculty, and community members. The presentation highlighted strengths and concerns as a basis for structured dialogue that encouraged participants to determine possible root causes and brainstorm potential solutions. The team then created an action plan and tracked progress throughout the implementation phase.

One concern that arose from the school's initial survey was a "puzzling gap" between teacher and student perceptions. When asked to respond to the statement, "I regularly check in with students to see if they are learning and adjust instruction based on what I hear," 97 percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed. Student responses to the corresponding survey item—"Teachers check in regularly to see if I am learning, and they adjust instruction based on what they hear"—showed only 68 percent in agreement. Reducing this gap became a priority for both youth and adults in the school.

The team developed a simple mid-semester survey soliciting feedback on the classroom experience. Faculty members led follow-up discussions to share what was working well and brainstorm solutions to concerns. The team also asked students to assess their own attributes as learners, reinforcing the concept that learning is a partnership. The practice of mid-course feedback has now become routine, giving students at least one opportunity each semester to reflect with their teachers on their learning experience and witness the impact of their feedback as classroom practice changes.

pur·pose

Students need to feel that their learning means something. Purpose engages students and inspires them to strive for more.

—Trent Rasmussen, teacher, Johnson Creek Middle School, Johnson Creek, Wisconsin

In this school and in others, creation of a feedback system was a first step toward positive change. The ongoing expectation that students will offer feedback also tends to foster such student-centered practices as greater differentiation, expanded opportunities for project-based learning, more independent and self-directed study, and shifts to more varied and more authentic assessment.

Shifting School Culture

Although such data-driven actions are significant, the *process* of doing this work is equally powerful. When students and adults share responsibility for reflecting together on practice (for students, on their own learning and for teachers, on their own pedagogy), they develop new habits of mind. As one teacher reported, "We are now aware of student voice and think of it when we're at meetings where the kids aren't included. We inform students in our classes about changes and explain why, so they understand. We value their concerns." A student participant saw the shift in even more dramatic terms, calling the partnership efforts "a peaceful revolution."

As the process of youth-adult partnership unfolded in Vermont schools, we began to see a new relationship among the four *R*s. We recognized that they were not simply a set of equally significant variables; instead, the fourth *R* is a central catalyst, activating and optimizing the other three. Shared responsibility, in other words, makes rigor, relevance, and relationships possible at the highest level.

Perspectives from Brain Research

Neurologic research supports this view by showing that when learners take an active role in the learning process, they are more likely to perform better academically, have a more positive self-concept, sustain better relationships with their peers, have a greater sense of responsibility, and achieve higher rates of college graduation (Zelden & Collura, 2010). Sharing responsibility requires students to become more active in their learning.

Research also confirms that effective learning depends on learners' capacity to understand and self-regulate their own learning process. When students develop metacognitive skills through reflection, they are able to plan, predict, and self-assess their learning. As students engage in these practices, they are better able to transfer their learning to new situations, promoting deeper and more enduring learning (National Research Council, 2000).

When teachers and students work together to shape the learning process, both engage in a continuous loop of reflection and co-construction. In an extensive meta-analysis of key variables affecting learning, John Hattie (2009) concluded that "the remarkable feature of the evidence is that the biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers" (p. 22). Such shared responsibility is the way to optimize rigor, relevance, and student-teacher relationships.

The Fourth *R* Beyond School

The cognitive and psychological benefits of learning partnerships are clear, but there are additional justifications for the fourth *R*. One is workplace readiness. Employers have identified a set of skills as essential for the workforce in this new century, among them critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, collaboration, communication, and initiative (Wagner, 2008). Although we don't yet have evidence of the impact the fourth *R* may have on development of such skills, we believe that shared student-teacher responsibility, along with the rich relationships that evolve in the process, may provide a powerful route to the essential outcomes for 21st century workforce success.

In Vermont, there is particular urgency to elevate the "missing *R*," as the state is in the midst of an unprecedented period of education redesign. Beginning in 2015, personalized learning plans for all students, flexible pathways to graduation, and proficiency-based graduation requirements will be statewide mandates. UP for Learning is working

with the Vermont Agency of Education to promote youth-adult partnerships. Students can and should be at the center of this movement toward student-centered learning.

Even beyond this, though, is a civic potential: Shared responsibility engages students as both active learners and active citizens. One Vermont school in an economically depressed community has demonstrated this clearly. Facing strong voter resistance to school taxes, the school had made deep cuts in its operating budget that reduced staffing and the range of course offerings. In its first action research cycle, the youth-adult partnership team addressed this by exploring scheduling alternatives; students developed a prototype that used semester block scheduling and created multidisciplinary offerings. After presenting the plan to the faculty and principal, they participated in co-creating the final schedule.

In the second year, another series of budget failures triggered students to engage with the public by organizing radio spots, writing letters to the editor of the local newspaper, designing a flyer and posters, attending school board and committee meetings, and presenting at board-sponsored information forums for the community. Students reported cautiously after one of these presentations that "everything seemed to go over well."

A teacher agreed: "They spoke their truths and left a board and community asking them for ways we can facilitate student, community, and board discussions about learning." The budget finally won approval in the fourth round of voting, but the teacher considered the adult response to students at least as important. In a community deeply divided over the cost of school support, students "were validated and respected and empowered."

As shared responsibility enhances learning, it will also enhance school change efforts. The way communities hold conversations about education varies, of course, but any teacher can choose to share responsibility and make the process of teaching transparent in ways that promote engaged learning. The effects are greatest when leaders support building the culture of shared responsi-

Video Bonus

Click here to learn more about UP for Learning's work on promoting shared responsibility and youth-adult partnerships.

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bility throughout a school or across a state, but the fundamental shift occurs in the teaching-learning relationship itself.

We can count on students to do their part. They will not only accept invitations to partnership, but also exceed expectations, surprising, challenging, and stretching their adult partners. As an UP for Learning team member said recently, reflecting on her career as a teacher and principal, "It took me 40 years to realize that students could be my colleagues." Others should not have to wait so long. It's time to showcase the power of the missing *R*, shared responsibility. EL

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