





THE KEYS TO THE CITY

BUILDING A TRUE COMMUNITY SCHOOL THROUGH AFTER-SCHOOL AND SUMMER LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

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By Debra Fishwick and Jodie Stewart-Ruck

Nestled in a small village high in the Green Mountains of Vermont, the Shrewsbury Mountain School (SMS) sits surrounded by forest, a community-built playground, and a garden integrated into the picturesque landscape. However, like every other American school, SMS faces constant challenges. Vermont is an aging state with a steady decrease in school-aged children and young families. The rural county supporting the school relies on tourism, small farms, and forestry to get by. All of

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these industries have faced challenges lately. In an increasingly digital world, SMS is miles away from cellphone reception, and the cozy, art-lined building is in need of upgrades.

One key factor allows SMS not only to address these concerns, but also to rise above expectations and meet the needs of the 21st century students it serves. SMS has strong, committed partnerships. The partnerships—specifically those serving SMS after school and in the summer—fall into three categories: partnerships with parents, with sponsors and funding sources, and with the community. These connections thrive because they hold meaning for students, center on high-interest initiatives, and tie into the larger community's values.

After-school and summer programs provide opportunities not always available within the school day, so strong partnerships are essential to their success. An exploration of Shrewsbury and its partnerships reveals a school that makes the most of the resources around it and tailors its programs to represent a true community school.

Rooted in History

After its founding shortly after the Revolutionary War, the town of Shrewsbury had 15 one-room schoolhouses. Several

of the original homesteads and farms still operate, providing the school with maple syrup for the breakfast program, fresh vegetables for the snack program, and milk from the local dairy farm for lunch.

With many of the one-room schoolhouses closed or in need of extensive repair, the current Shrewsbury Mountain School was founded in 1974, with an addition built in 1987. SMS currently serves 80 students. The town has about 1,000 people, many of them seasonal residents who take advantage of the quiet surroundings and the close proximity to Killington and Okemo Mountain. However, the town is beginning to see a shift in this demographic as more young families purchase homes in Shrewsbury. Many of these young parents attended SMS themselves and want the best possible programs for their children. This combination of multigenerational stakeholders and energized forward-thinking parents drives the partnerships at SMS.

Parent Partnerships: Empowering Key Stakeholders

Despite competing interests and busy schedules, every parent is invested in his or her child's education. When parents are provided with multiple ways to help, they

not only become more invested in school initiatives, but also begin to own the work in tandem with educators and students. Adrienne Raymond, a Shrewsbury school board member and parent who has been partnering with the school for more than 25 years, believes, "What sets Shrewsbury apart is the accessibility. Parents are welcomed into the school constantly and are made to feel as if they can not only help, but come up with their own initiatives and implement them to improve the school."

When Shrewsbury's playground needed an upgrade, parents were asked to help raise funds for the new equipment and install it once it was delivered. Parents and teachers organized work weekends to put everything together and mulch underneath. SMS asked parents to choose among organizing events, fundraising, contributing financially, or getting together to set everything up in order to provide opportunities for individuals to help in the way that best fit their strengths. The playground is used daily by the after-school program and seasonally by the summer program. It is open to the public whenever school is not in session.

Parents also partner with SMS through the school's winter sports program. Because skiing and snowboarding are so important to Vermont's culture and economy, many area elementary schools offer a program in which students are released early once a week in winter and are taken to the mountain, where

they learn to snowboard or ski—a skill that may lead to employment opportunities as they get older.

In some schools, however, families are asked to pay for lessons and lift tickets, and those who cannot or choose not to must go home instead of participating. At SMS, Raymond states, “parents and educators feel it is important that every student has access to this program, and so parents come together to fully fund the program through donations and fundraisers.” Recently, a community member whose children once attended the school single-handedly funded a season on the slopes for the school. Nearly 20 parents and community members also volunteer through the program to chaperone and provide instruction. Raymond believes this activity “brings the community together and provides a unique opportunity for students.”

Funding and Sponsor Partnerships: Investments in Success

Because SMS is small and geographically isolated, getting access to funding and sponsors can be a challenge. To overcome it, Shrewsbury focuses on developing relationships with small or local organizations. One essential after-school and summer partnership is with Four Winds Nature Institute, a local nonprofit organization focused on advancing the understanding and protection of the



environment through community-based natural science education and research. Because Four Winds is a small organization, SMS combined its support with a grant from a local General Electric plant, an anonymous donation, and parent support to build a community garden, an outdoor classroom, and a series of school-day and after-school programs that students love. The outdoor classroom is used continuously as students study physical and life sciences and simply engage with nature after school. Summer program students lovingly tend the garden with community members and teachers and, in the fall, share the harvest with after-school students, using their products for edible art or taste tests. Galen Miller, a parent and volunteer, says, “The next big step is to get a chore board up so students can take over as much as possible.”

Another key sponsor at SMS is the artist-in-residence program. The PTO holds annual fundraisers to support these

programs, and each year SMS hosts an artist for a week of lessons, fun, and creativity. These activities take place during the school day and after school. At the conclusion of the week, the school hosts an exhibition to show off student work. In a recent partnership, Circus Smirkus spent a week with SMS students, and the community was treated to a student-led circus at the end of the residency.

Community Partnerships: Growing the Citizens We Need

Community partnerships provide services and activities for after-school and summer students instead of the direct funding provided by a partnership with a sponsor. However, like SMS' funding partnerships, the school focuses on local organizations that naturally dovetail with the school's goals and existing programs. The school has partnered with a local agricultural and garden foundation called SAGE for the

Focusing on partnerships with smaller institutions provides opportunities to tailor the relationship closely to the needs of both institutions and allows the formation of close, personal connections.

last few years. SAGE brings a brightly painted green bus called the “good food bus” to the school each fall and presents students with a taste-test feast of dishes made from local produce. Students get to choose their favorite dish and are then brought into the bus to pick out the ingredients for the dish. The kids take the recipe and ingredients home after school to share the bounty with their families. In spring, the good food bus returns to SMS to give students their choice of vegetable plants, which are taken home to plant with their families, integrating school, after school, and home. The school buys produce from the local farms that help support the program in order to complete the cycle of community support.

Miller points out, “Besides encouraging families to get outside and eat locally, SAGE holds an annual harvest supper to financially support the fruits-and-vegetable snack program and offers meal scholarships for families that may not meet the financial criteria for free or reduced-price meals.”

Another key community partnership at SMS is its connection with the local library. Shrewsbury Town Library provides

after-school and summer programs, such as a Lego club, that are cross-advertised with school programs. In addition, the library maintains a “free book” box at the school so students in the after-school and summer programs can pick up and read a book any time they have the opportunity. Students can take as many books as they like. Bus drivers also take advantage of the book box, so students have something to do on the long ride home. Raymond believes “this partnership creates future engaged library patrons and increases student and parent dedication to maintaining the library.”

Transferable Skills: Ideas for Any School

SMS makes the most of the limited partnerships offered, but many strategies it uses are applicable to any school.

- **Focus on partnerships with smaller institutions.** A focus on smaller partnerships allows for increasing depth in the relationship over time and for the ability to combine the resources offered by multiple partnerships into a single school goal.

- **Home in on partnerships that are aligned with the school’s goals.** Align partnerships with the school’s mission instead of courting partnerships that may offer more support but require the school to alter the focus of its programs.
- **Seek out partnerships that are hyper-local.** It may be advantageous to assess the resources near your school and look for partnerships that really tap into the businesses, interests, and natural resources for which your community is uniquely known.
- **Connect after-school and summer programs to school-day initiatives.** Enriching themes and activities that are already a part of the school day increases the depth of student learning and enthusiasm for extracurricular programs.
- **Most importantly, engage students.** If young people are excited about the opportunities the partnership provides, it is sure to be a success. Data, academic growth, and happier families are all wonderful outcomes, but smiling faces are the best way to show partners that their work is appreciated. •

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