

[Trailblazers program puts Mohawk Trail Regional School on new path](#)

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Hazel Foucault, Emma Thrower and Adrian Grant bucked the tide. They opted to stay at Mohawk Trail Regional School instead of leaving — as hundreds of other students have done in the past two decades — for a charter school, vocational program or private school.

And they all say they're happy with their choice, in part because of an education makeover at Mohawk Trail that puts students at the center of their learning experience.

"I almost went to (The Academy at) Charlemont, but I'm so glad I stayed," said Foucault, a junior who has attended Mohawk Trail, off Route 112, since the seventh grade. "It's allowed me to create an education for myself that I'm really proud of."

Thrower considered going to a technical school or leaving school altogether due to ongoing anxiety issues. But she stayed at Mohawk Trail and is now just a few months away from graduating.

"If it weren't for the supportive teachers (at Mohawk Trail), I would have dropped out," said the 18-year-old, who has focused much of her classwork, including an independent study and her senior capstone project, on art that calms her anxiety.

Grant credits Mohawk Trail with letting her explore her interest in health care. In just the past few months, she has shadowed an emergency room doctor and completed a 100-hour internship at a nursing home.

"I'm really happy I stayed here," the high school senior said. After working at the nursing home, she realized her passion lies in pediatric health care and will be pursuing that in college. "I'm way more comfortable now expressing what I want to do, and the teachers definitely listen."

With enrollment dropping as the region's population declined, Mohawk Trail decided to forge a new identity a half-dozen years ago.

The traditional, top-down "textbooks-and-tests" approach is now out. A more flexible, bottom-up student-centered approach is in.

Called the Trailblazer model, it's been taking shape since 2018, when Mohawk Trail received a seed grant from Mass IDEAS, an effort to reimagine public schools. Mohawk Trail was one of the first rural schools in Massachusetts to embrace the model.

“We needed a big mindset shift. We needed to meet kids where they are,” said Rachel Silverman, an art teacher and early leader of the redesign effort that was formally launched at Mohawk Trail starting in 2021.

With nearly \$1 million in support from the Boston-based Barr Foundation, the Trailblazer model empowers students and teachers alike. Students are now shaping their own classes and independent studies, taking college classes, running the school assemblies and even tweaking the school schedule.

Teachers have more opportunities to suggest new courses and take on new responsibilities, whether it’s running the Equity Council or coordinating the popular student advisory groups, which meet every day. Teachers receive \$500 to \$1,500 annual stipends for taking on new work.

‘Whole humans’

Community engagement is another key pillar because it opens the doors for students to do internships, whether at law and architectural firms or car repair shops, hospitals and veterinary clinics.

This approach, Silverman said, gives students a broad mix of “soft skills” that they’ll need to thrive in today’s world.

“They’ll probably need to navigate different careers, they’ll need to navigate different technologies, they’ll need to be self-driven,” she said.

Rachel Hoogstraten, who teaches English and coordinates the senior capstone program, echoed the point.

“It’s pretty easy in the traditional educational model to graduate, but to have no practical experience with that,” she said. “We’re now giving students a chance to try things out.”

So far, the Trailblazer program is working, according to school Principal Chris Buckland, who is seeing improvements in students’ stress levels and their connections to their teachers and the overall school community.

William Drake, an English teacher and advisory group coordinator, said the closer student-teacher connection is huge.

“The Trailblazer model works because we’re treating kids as whole humans, not just as individuals in a class,” he said.

Data also shows happier teachers.

“It’s been really amazing to work here,” said Hoogstraten, who has been teaching at Mohawk Trail for 10 years. “Now when I have a good idea, there is structured support to make it happen.”

Most important, especially as the Mohawk Trail/Hawlemont sustainability project is considering district-wide restructuring options, Mohawk Trail's enrollment figures are also improving, hitting 320 in January, compared to 266 in 2021-2022 and 284 in 2022-2023.

While it's too early to measure academic performance, Buckland said he is encouraged by the momentum.

"We've got a really good foundation and we're making good strides," said Buckland, who joined Mohawk Trail in the fall of 2021. "If we can continue in this direction, we're looking at a really unique school compared to others in western Massachusetts."

From Emma Thrower, the Trailblazer program already holds a special place.

"We're all really close here," said the Charlemont senior, who especially appreciates the support from her advisory group. "We have open discussions and really talk.

"The school is definitely a lot better than it was before."

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