

## **A Word from the Headmaster: “Change, Growth, and Sustainability”**

By Daren M. Houck

Some of you have heard this story before. Just a few short weeks after arriving in Vermont in late June of 2004, local clerks and cashiers noticed that the cars with the “Florida” plates seemed to be sticking around a little longer than the normal vacationer. Suzanne—my wife—and I looked too young to be “part-timers,” so the assumption was that we must have recently moved. “Where you work?” was the frequently asked question. “The Mountain School at Winhall,” I would always reply. Their retort—after the third or fourth time—started to concern me. It seemed that good ol’ MSW didn’t have the best reputation out in the community.

Ten years and six heads of school later, The Mountain School has gone through a beautiful transformation. I am amazed at the now positive comments being spoken throughout the community. There is pride, congratulations, excitement, curiosity...all sorts of affirmative dialogue from those both within and without of the school. As I have stated many times over, I am thankful and blessed to have been a part of such a wonderful school family these past four-plus years. We have been a part of such drastic change over the last few years (of the 16 employees currently in the school, only one was at MSW before my arrival). Our people, programs, and performance all have experienced dramatic growth. From an enrollment of 54 students to 70 (and more still coming!) currently enrolled; from a fledgling idea of “integration” to the creation of a comprehensive, thematic, and multidisciplinary Pre-K-8 curriculum; and from experiencing a budget shortfall of nearly \$75,000 to starting our own endowment, we have quickly climbed the ladder to success. New families from other cities, towns, and schools have all raved about The Mountain School and proudly rated it as such a wonderful place to be. Current families felt a renewed excitement and pride that their little community school was moving forward in such a positive manner so quickly.

This success has been powerful. However, our own success can also be a detriment to those that let it. Some of us became so accustomed to such dramatic growth and improvement towards excellence that we may have felt this rate of acceleration would continue forever—an impossibility! We may not have considered that our growth would actually begin to plateau.

This “leveling off” is not a bad thing; it is a natural occurrence. It happens to everyone and everything —be it our weight loss rate on a diet or our once-growing-now-falling stock portfolio. Things begin to plateau. Here is where we can examine the differences between *change*, *growth*, and *sustainability*.

Change, actually, is easy. And it is often necessary. But something to remember...change is not always best or right. For example, sometimes change is just an easy way out. Change does not always require the values of commitment or perseverance—values that lead to successful relationships, careers, and lives. Also, change does not bring about growth...it merely brings the opportunity for growth, which takes me to my next point.

Growth, the next important area, is necessary for life. Once a change has transpired—be it a new staff in a school or a seed changing to a plant—growth can, and must begin. If we are not growing, we’re dying. We must all be progressing forward. The

stages of this progression, remember, are so varied. For example, a baby develops and grows so quickly in comparison to an adult. Compare a child's development from birth to 10 to an adult's change from 30 to 40. There is clearly a much greater variance the first part of our life with a plateau later on. Regardless of this lesser rate of change, however, our hope is that we will still always continue to grow. A plateau can—and should in this case—have an incline. That “incline,” or growth, can only take place if we are “fertile ground”—open, motivated, committed, persevering. Growth, then, takes me to my third point...sustaining.

The most difficult of these three areas is sustainability—keeping what is good, good and to taking something used and keeping it fresh. Sustainability is the only place where true “excellence” is found. The New England Patriots are an example of sustainability. Years ago, a change takes place: a new young coach was hired and new players were drafted. This change then promoted growth—these individuals were committed to and allowed to improve. Since then, they have not won every Super Bowl, but they have consistently been at or near the top for years. They have become one of (if not “the”) the best teams in NFL history. When times get tough or not every game is won, it would be easy to fire the coach or trade the quarterback. But a new team doesn't bring about sustainability. It only brings about change. And constant change never allows for stability and, ultimately, sustainability—the necessary ingredient for excellence.

What does all this have to do with The Mountain School? We have experienced such drastic growth over the previous years that, while continuously striving for excellence, our rapid development has begun to level off. This is not a sign of stagnation or mediocrity. Nor is it a sign of “becoming” anything. Rather, it is a sign of “being”—being good and steadily working on continuously perfecting our craft. In light of this, The Mountain School is wholly committed to not only sustaining this place of being a “great school,” we are also committed to continually striving for excellence in all we do.

I am—and I believe many of us—recognize that this place is “Beyond the Ordinary.” However, it is important for us to remember that, even though we may not be experiencing such great leaps and bounds of change anymore, we are an outstanding educational institution. We appreciate those that continue to strive towards that path of excellence with us and choose to be open, motivated, committed and persevering. We appreciate your support and commitment in order to continue to make MSW beyond the ordinary for years to come. And as I have repeatedly stated, don't take my word for it—go visit other schools and talk to other parents. I believe that you will come back recognizing how fortunate we are to have such a wonderful community school.