

1) SVP partner Molly Kimball sits down to work closely with a student. (Photos courtesy of Social Venture Partners, except where otherwise noted)

2) Aaron Jacobs of Social Venture Partners

3) A Social Venture Partners donor and volunteer, Phil Welt spends time in the classroom, such as with these fifth-grade students at Seattle's Sacajawea Elementary School.

4) Gatewood Elementary School Principal Dan Barton on his vision for kids: "If they can think critically, if they can interact cooperatively, if they can learn in a variety of ways, then they can solve any problem they will face." (Photo by Denise Jarrett Weeks)



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SOCIAL INVESTMENTS: Venture Philanthropists “Pay It Forward” to Seattle Schools

A GROUP OF YOUNG AND WEALTHY HIGH-TECH PROS BACK INNOVATIVE PRACTICES AT AN AGING WEST SEATTLE SCHOOL

By Bracken Reed

WEST SEATTLE, Washington

—The red brick schoolhouse sits atop its hill on Southwest Myrtle Street like a messenger from another time. In 1902, when Gatewood Elementary was built, the city was barely a half-century old and still roaring from its first economic boom. As a jumping-off point for the rough and rowdy adventurers of the Klondike gold rush, Seattle had established a reputation as a hard-working town full of risk takers, fortune seekers, and those driven by dreams of a new beginning.

A hundred years later, the city's first boom is a mirror for its latest. Innovation and risk taking are still hallmarks of the Emerald City, as are fortune seeking and reckless opportunism. But alongside runs another trait just as prevalent in the city's colorful history. The old Gatewood school may have been financed with gold rush money, but it was built with the philanthropy and hard work of those who stayed after the boom had gone bust. In the wake of the “dot-com” bust, its presence is reassuring. Whatever happens, it seems to say, “We go on—we learn, we teach, we keep on dreaming.”

Inside its venerable walls, the current principal, Dan Barton, has spent a lot of time thinking about the future. As a doctoral student at the University of Oregon, Barton stumbled on to two statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor that struck him as having huge implications for public education. The first, that 80 percent of the jobs that would be awaiting today's elementary school students did not currently exist; the second, that the average person will change careers between four and eight times in his or her life. For Barton, something clicked.

NOT JUST THE THREE R'S

That the experience of preparing for a profession, finding a job in your field, and working for a single company until retirement is nearing extinction, is not news. What is, according to Barton, is an acknowledgment that the public education system too often does a lousy job of educating children to deal with this reality. As he sees it, they're still being prepared for the 20th century, while the 21st century leaves them behind.

With this in mind, Barton began asking what was then a very provocative question: What do we need to do to fundamentally change the way we do business in public education? The question followed him out the door of the university and haunted

him through stints as an assistant principal and principal in two California school districts.

By the time he came to Gatewood Elementary in the fall of 1993, Barton devised an answer: a reform model he calls Independent Learners. Drawing on research on instructional strategies, as well as Howard Gardner's theories of the nine types of intelligence, Independent Learners focuses on Barton's “big four”: critical thinking, cooperative learning, multiple intelligences, and technology. These are combined with the four major areas of the state standards (reading, writing, math, and communications) to form the “big eight.” Pulling all eight components into a unified curriculum is both his vision and his challenge.

“Our students are going to need to be very adaptable and very global in their outlook,” Barton says. “Those are things that can be taught, and should be taught, in the same way we teach reading or math. We can't prepare them for a specific profession or situation, but we can teach them how to adapt to any situation they find themselves in. If they can think critically, if they can interact cooperatively, if they can learn in a variety of ways, then they can solve any problem they will face.”

By all accounts, Barton arrived in Seattle with the missionary zeal of the newly converted. A traditionally low-achieving school in a district open to change, Gatewood seemed to be a perfect opportunity to apply his theories. The issue that had haunted him had become more quest than question and, in this one public school, he set out to fundamentally change the way business was done.

Ten years in, the results have been positive, but they have not been free of conflict. In many ways, Barton's experience at Gatewood is a textbook example of ivory-tower ideals crashing up against real-world complexity; of a young, ambitious innovator who has had to learn that educational theories are hollow if not accompanied by effective “people skills,” and that school reform is not the job of a single, visionary administrator, but of an entire community.

One part of that larger community has come from a place Barton could not have foreseen: an organization formed by another group of ambitious and innovative pioneers.

VENTURE-STYLE PHILANTHROPY

To get to the downtown headquarters of Social Venture Partners (SVP) from Gatewood Elementary, one must go through the heart of the West Seattle peninsula and across the West Seattle Bridge. Many of the neighborhoods in this part of the city still exude the blue-collar, resource-based economy of the pre-Microsoft era. Mini-marts, gas stations, fast food restaurants, and taverns far outnumber Starbucks. Freight cars rumble down the tracks beside the Duwamish River, and a nearby steel mill serves as a reminder that the area was once called “Seattle’s Little Pittsburgh.” The ghosts of an older Seattle seem to hover around the shipyards, cement factories, and canneries strung out along the eastern shoreline. The past seems closer here.

But as you take the exit into downtown, the gleaming new baseball and football stadiums are an immediate reminder of the city’s recent technology-driven, white-collar prosperity. Whatever the current fortunes of the NASDAQ, Seattle has been transformed. And among those who contributed to this transformation are the members of Social Venture Partners.

Paul Brainerd, the founder of Aldus Corporation, and sometimes called “the father of desktop publishing” for his role in creating PageMaker software, started SVP in 1997 along with family, friends, and associates—predominantly current or ex-Microsoft employees who had made a bundle in the technology boom. Always ahead of the curve, Brainerd sensed a shift happening in the hearts and minds of those around him. Their fortunes made, many were looking for a way to give back, but were uncomfortable with traditional philanthropy. As Aaron Jacobs, a program associate at SVP says, “Most of them were still young—they weren’t ready to just start writing checks and retiring. They wanted to be involved in the organizations they gave their money to, and they wanted to share their skills and experience.”

At the same time, Brainerd was hearing a consistent message from local nonprofit organizations. These groups wanted and needed cash, but they also had needs that were not being met by traditional grants: They wanted to know how to run their organizations better, how to incorporate technology, how to build infrastructure. In short, they wanted exactly the kind of knowledge that Brainerd and his highly successful associates from the for-profit sector had to offer.

Bringing these two groups together became the driving force behind SVP. Donors to the organization could fulfill their desire for engaged, participatory philanthropy, while the nonprofits they served would benefit from their knowledge, skills, and contacts in a way that far exceeded what dollars alone could do. And both would learn valuable lessons about the realities of working for positive, social change.

It wasn’t long before SVP found itself involved in one of the largest nonprofit sectors of all: public education. And one of the first projects that attracted their attention was the work of a young, innovative principal at Gatewood Elementary.

VALUE OF THE VOLUNTEER

Gatewood applied for and received a grant from SVP for \$50,000. But it was the other part of SVP’s philosophy that would prove to have the biggest impact. Alexa Carver, a former educator and entrepreneur became the main contact or “lead partner” for SVP at Gatewood. Like all SVP partners, Carver had donated \$5,500 dollars of her own money, but she had also made a commitment to offer her time and expertise wherever it could best be used.

When she was a teacher, Carver had developed standards for a “critical thinking” component, which she openly shared with Barton and the Gatewood staff. She also connected the school with three other partners from SVP: Rogers Weed, a Microsoft executive; Paul Gross, an ex-Microsoft employee; and Erin Hemmings, the associate director of SVP and a grantwriting specialist. All three were able to help the school in ways Barton had barely imagined. “I used to have the mindset that we’re the experts,” he says, “we’re the ones that are educated and have experience in this process, so if you can give us the money that’s great, because we know what to do. But SVP has educated me on the value of the volunteer.”

CONSIDER THIS

Social Venture Partners (SVP) is a philanthropic organization built on a venture capitalism model. “Venture capitalists not only find a company and make an investment of dollars,” reads the organization’s Web site, “but also assess the company’s needs and infuse that company with the knowledge, skills, and contacts of its partners.”

The philanthropy’s model relies on donors, who are called “partners.” Each partner contributes \$5,500 dollars a year, with a minimum two-year commitment. In addition, more than two-thirds of SVP’s partners participate in a pool of volunteers. A lead partner is assigned to every funded organization, and additional volunteers are drawn from the pool by matching their skills and knowledge with the needs of the grantee. The emphasis is on a long-term (usually a five-year minimum), fully engaged commitment.

Originally started with only 30 partners, both the organization and its model have spread like wildfire—there are now more than 285 partners. They have granted more than \$6 million to Seattle-area nonprofits in the areas of early childhood development and parenting, the environment, K–12 education, and out-of-school time programs for youth ages five to 18. More important, SVP has donated tens of thousands of volunteer hours to these organizations, creating relationships that have lasted well past the initial grants. It is clearly an idea whose time has come. There are now more than two dozen organizations that have adopted the model, as well as an alliance that promotes it internationally (www.svpintl.org).

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At the same time, SVP was learning some valuable lessons about the realities of the education system. “We learned early on that it’s a lot more difficult to make an impact in public education than we originally thought,” says Jacobs. “Our partners have learned an immense amount about what public schools are facing and what the kids are facing—all the nonacademic factors that come into play—health care issues, family issues, race issues, class issues, the school’s climate. There are so many things kids have to deal with before they can actually learn. And you also have people pulling those institutions in every direction possible.”

A JOINT VENTURE

Dan Barton has learned many things about the forces that push and pull at public schools. And like the partners of SVP, he has learned humility. Barton’s zeal has made him a controversial figure in the Seattle School District. He’s been criticized for his reform efforts and personal style, and has had to deal with a period of high teacher turnover. But he’s also been praised for turning around a struggling school and for ultimately forming a first-rate staff that is fully committed to

an innovative and effective curriculum. Along the way, he has maintained the staunch support of both the district superintendent and the members of SVP, says Aaron Jacobs.

“Anytime there is change there’s going to be resistance and conflict,” says Jacobs, “especially when there’s a strong leader with a clear vision. You can expect a certain amount of turnover. But for us, strong leadership is one of the key factors for a successful relationship. We always hope that a strong leader will be in place long enough to affect positive change.”

These days, the old halls of Gatewood Elementary are alive with bright-eyed students and committed educators preparing them to deal with the uncertain future to come. But the most important lesson of Gatewood may be one as old as the sound of a ship’s foghorn ringing out over Elliott Bay: We cannot do it alone. That whatever the future will be, we will make it together, or not at all. ■