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# Sharon Academy Leader Reflects as He Plans to Step Aside

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Before dismissing students from a film screening and Q&A session that took them inside a New Hampshire women's prison and acquainted them with the grim realities of drug addiction, Michael Livingston offered a mundane reminder to throw away the snack containers they'd brought with them into the film.

Later, he made a sweep beneath the rows of worn couches and stacks of second-hand chairs in the school's Moore Hall and unearthed two little paper food trays that hadn't made it into the recycling bin. These he stacked and set on his desk: trophies of a sort. Two out of an estimated 60 is pretty good. Two out of 60 means students care.

And that's what it's all about for Livingston as he enters the homestretch of a 20-year career at The Sharon Academy, a small, private middle and high school that serves students from 16 towns.

"It all comes back to trust and respect," said Livingston, who announced earlier this month that he'll retire as head of school next year. "It's the culture that we've created and sustained ... everyone is vested in the school."

These might be abstract concepts, but Livingston believes they're evident everywhere: in the unlocked doors and lockers, in the student-run electives that take place every afternoon, in the homey hangouts set up throughout the building and, most importantly, in the conversations that unfold everyday — conversations so distinct to his character, they're known as "ML conversations."

Livingston, who came to The Sharon Academy in 2000, four years after its founding, decided early on that he wanted to push the school out of traditional frameworks. When he became head of school around 2005, he began advancing what's known as a distributed leadership model — giving all faculty and staff a stake in running the school.

"Most of the adults here teach and then some," said Livingston, who lives on a small farm in Sharon with his wife, Laurie Foster, a midwife.

Mary Newman, who teaches Spanish and serves as dean of faculty at the school, said Livingston has given her the confidence and space to grow in her career. "He has taught me to realize my potential," said Newman, who has taught at The Sharon Academy for 11 years. "I think one thing he's extremely good at is getting to know people." And in knowing people, she said, he can identify and promote their strengths. "I think he's set up a large number of his faculty and staff here to be ready for leadership," she said.

And it's not just faculty and staff who shoulder serious responsibility. Of all his works at the school, Livingston is perhaps proudest of the student leadership model he's helped create. Students teach electives such as quilting, fly fishing and improv, put on an annual all-school musical with only minimal faculty oversight, serve on the school's board of trustees and play an active role in decision making. The student government, which is open to all students, has helped revise the school's curriculum, dress code and school schedule, among other things.

Livingston remembers the day two ninth-graders showed up in his doorway asking if they could start a maple sugaring elective. "I said, 'do you have a business plan?' And they said, 'no.' And I said, 'well come back when you do,'" he said.

They did, this time asking for an \$800 loan. Livingston wrote them a check and gave them a promissory note with a two-year term. The project was a big success, the money was paid back, and the students went on to successful careers in forestry, Livingston said. The sugaring elective still runs every year.

"Treat them like young adults, and most of the time they'll act like young adults," he said.

Livingston acknowledges that students do occasionally take advantage of the freedoms they're afforded at the school, but those incidents are rare. And when admonitions are needed, these, too, are delivered with respect. "I don't need to get mad at someone to get my point across," he said.

Livingston, who turns 65 this week, grew up in a different era, one in which teachers maintained a distance from their students, believing that respect was a one-way street. Born and raised in San Francisco, he majored in 20th-century European history at the University of California, Berkeley and then moved to Vermont with his wife as she pursued a career in midwifery. In 1981, he picked up a maternity-leave position at South Royalton Elementary School, which turned into a 15-year career teaching in elementary schools in South Royalton, Hartford and Norwich. Meanwhile, he earned his master's degree and certification in educational leadership from Keene State College.

His daughter Shayla, the eldest of his three children, began attending The Sharon Academy in 1996, the year it opened. Four years later, he followed her there, landing the job of assistant head of school and history/humanities teacher.

While steering the school through initiatives including accreditation, expanded special education services, open enrollment and a proficiency-based teaching and assessment system, Livingston has intentionally preserved the school's small size. Not long after he came to The Sharon Academy, he and other staff members decided that a student body of 150 was just right. He later read research supporting their hunch. "Human communities split at about 150," he said. "It certainly makes a lot of sense here."

It's not scale alone that allows The Sharon Academy's model to thrive, but the atmosphere that's been carefully cultivated there, Livingston said.

"The school's in a really good place because of the collective work of parents, students, faculty and staff," he said. "There's a culture here that we've created and sustained. People here are committed to that culture."

Over the years, as Livingston promoted a collaborative environment based on trust and respect, he could sense the eventual outcome of his mission.

"I could see that the natural conclusion to that was that at some point the head of school ... needs to just get out of the way," he said.

The decision to step aside wasn't easy, said Livingston, who will end his tenure in June 2020. Telling the school community was even harder — but the students eased the sting a bit. Addressing the student body a few weeks ago, Livingston told them that he was going to need their support as he processed his decision. "They were incredible ... they just listened," Livingston said. "You know the difference between just sitting there and really listening."

It's a difference that Livingston models constantly for faculty and students.

"If he knows you're going through something, he'll take the time to talk with you," said Hailey Swett, a 17-year-old senior from Norwich. "He really, really cares about the students."

"He's willing to stop what he had planned and pull someone aside because he sees they're hurt," said Brian Tonks, a math teacher and assistant head of school. "He knows it's more important."

"ML conversations are a thing," said Newman. "Easy ones, hard ones, happy ones, sad ones. "It's really an extraordinary thing for a boss to take the kind of time that people need."

Livingston expects everyone to take that kind of time for one another. "He asks a lot of us. He asks us to be present in a way that is whole," said Tonks, who has taught at The Sharon Academy for 18 years.

Along with encouraging members of the school community to take care of each other, Livingston urges them to care about everything they do, from recycling their food containers to planning their careers.

“He seems to always stress that learning is about empowering,” said Ollie Skeet Browning, a 16-year-old junior from Sharon. “Learning is a privilege.”

These kinds of lessons can’t be imparted artificially, especially when you’re dealing with teenagers, said Livingston, who has no particular plans for retirement.

“It doesn’t require a certain style. It requires authenticity. They have to know you mean it,” he said. “I love teenagers. They’re wonderful. I think they’re funny, they’re bright, they really care. They’re passionate, they’re quirky, they’re mischievous, they’re questioning everything, and it’s their job to do so. Adults need to spend more time just talking to kids.”

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