

Private Schools *with a* Public Mission



Burr and Burton Academy in Manchester has a graduation rate that's virtually 100 percent and AP results that rank in the top five percent nationally.

Vermont's town academies occupy a unique place in our secondary education system.

THERE ARE PLACES where tradition still matters. At Burr and Burton Academy in Manchester, a set of steps where only seniors (and adults) may tread. At St. Johnsbury Academy, daily morning chapel where students recite the Pledge of Allegiance and listen to a values-based talk. At Lyndon Institute, an annual parade of floats from campus to the town square just before “The Game” with St. Johnsbury. And at the oldest secondary school in Vermont, Thetford Academy (founded in 1819), the annual Mountain Day, in which each class hikes one of the six peaks visible from the school. These traditions, however, are not the rituals of elite private schools. They are the traditions of the four schools that survive the era when town academies were common in Vermont. Founded as private institutions in the early to mid-19th century, before secondary education became compulsory—Massachusetts was the first state to pass a law in 1852, followed by Vermont in 1867—these schools have evolved to occupy a unique place in Vermont's system of secondary education.

Not surprisingly, the headmasters at these academies are often asked, “Is your school public or private?” Thetford Academy's Associate Head of School, Martha Jane Rich, answers this way: “We're a private school with a public mission. We're an independent school, because we have independent governance, but we open our doors to all local students who want to be educated here.”

A visitor would note aspects common to public schools: at Thetford, 99 percent of the students are funded by tax dollars from sending towns; at St. Johnsbury, state approval for almost every special education category; at Lyndon, a technical education center that serves students across the region; and at Burr and Burton, an alternative education program for students at risk of dropping out.



But that same visitor would also notice elements common to private schools: stately old buildings like the limestone Seminary Building at Burr and Burton; St. Johnsbury Academy's formal dress code, requiring a shirt and tie for young men and a collared shirt for young women; and Lyndon Institute's international boarding students from Spain, Germany, Japan, China and Kazakhstan.

As town academies, these schools have much in common. According to St. Johnsbury's Headmaster, Tom Lovett, "...all of Vermont's town academies are mission based. All of them enroll a wide range of students. But all of them have some degree of independence in their curriculum and in the way they pursue their mission." And all have managed to endure, while other town academies closed or became public schools.

By most measures, these schools have not only endured, they've thrived. In statistics provided by the Vermont Department of Education, the 9th to 12th grade dropout rate for 2008–2009 is 2.89 percent statewide. By comparison, the rate for these four schools is 0.89 percent. Similarly, while the statewide graduation rate is a respectable 93.77 percent, the graduation rate for the four academies is 97.03.

While John Hall, who serves on the State Board of Education, is reluctant to say town academies are better than their public school counterparts (despite being an alum and former trustee of St. Johnsbury), he points to the fact that these schools have to be good to attract clients. In most cases, their public school students are not required to attend the town academy; instead, they choose to enroll. "Not having a guaranteed enrollment forces you to be entrepreneurial," he says. "Students are your clients; their parents are your customers."



The philosophy at Lyndon Institute, says headmaster Rick Hilton (upper left) is "excellence without elitism...That it works is shown by the high aspirations of our students in a poor rural area."

Lyndon Institute

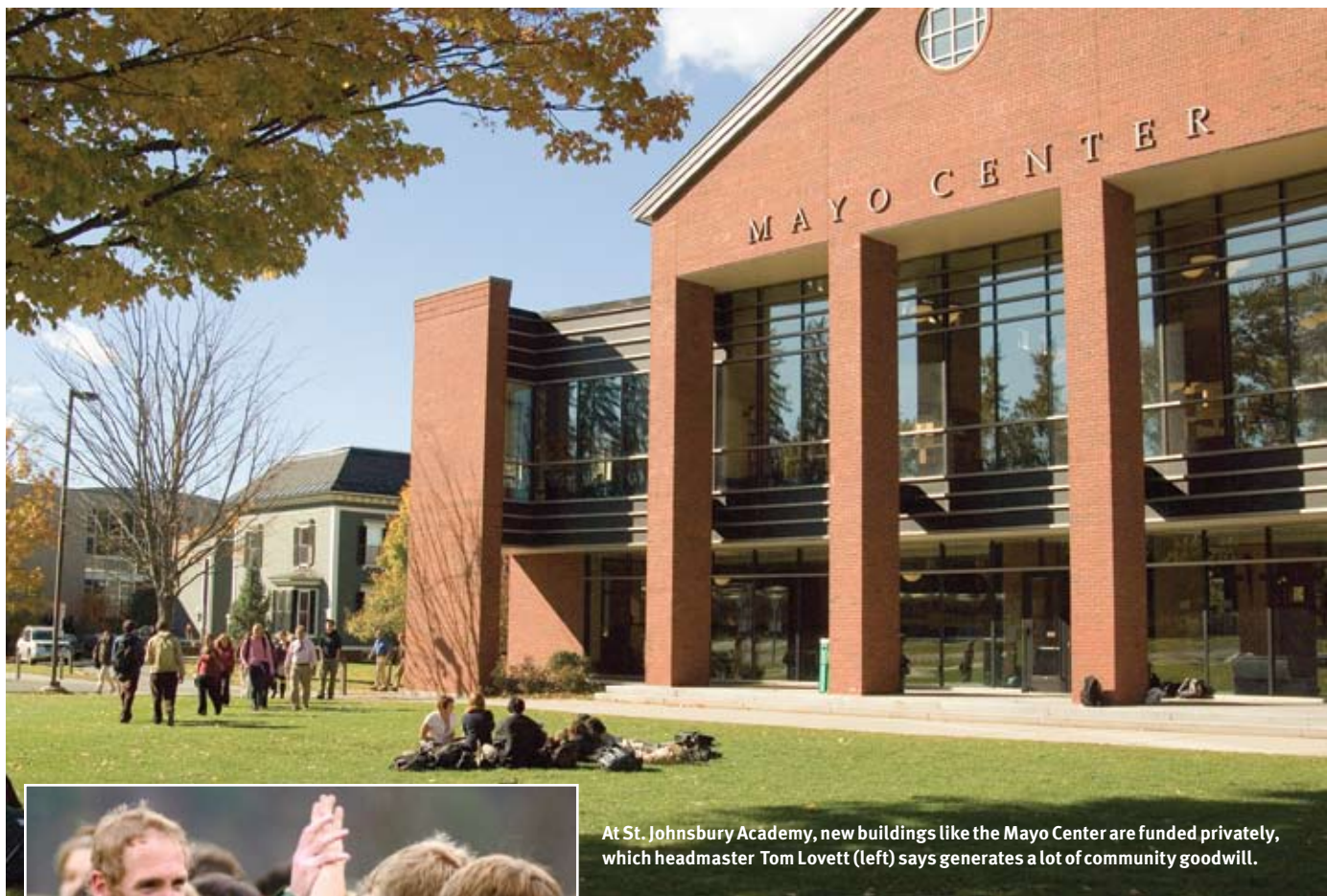
Lyndon Institute's Headmaster, Rick Hilton, came to Lyndon after 20 years at The Hill School in eastern Pennsylvania. For Hilton, "coming to Lyndon was very much like coming home." Part of the attraction was his Vermont family roots, including the Wheelock family for whom the neighboring town of Wheelock is named, and Eleazar Wheelock, the founder of Dartmouth College. According to Hilton, however, it was more than a family connection that drew him to Lyndon: "We really wanted the authentic community one finds...This is the America that people wish still existed."

But one should not mistake nostalgia for small-town life with a small-time school. Hilton is quick to point out the quality of the fine and performing arts program at Lyndon: "We win award after award...we're known regionally, even nationally for the quality of our fine and performing arts programs. We're also very strong in writing."

While Hilton's comments may sound like a press release, he is able to articulate why his town academy works.

He cites the qualities common to private schools: a tendency to hire talented graduates who majored in the subject they will teach; outcome-based learning in which "teachers agree with department chairs on what students should know and be able to do, and how they would know they had reached that point;" teachers who enjoy autonomy in their classroom and who share in decision making; and a demand for excellence in everything "from the lunch we serve to the tone of discourse in the classroom."

At the same time, Hilton can address the public side of the equation, pointing out that Lyndon Institute serves all of its students and offers a full range of technical education programs, allowing students to study everything from automotive technology to culinary arts. "That it works is shown by the high aspirations of our students in a poor rural area, despite the fact that 40 percent qualify for Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Programs and 51 percent come to us from 'disrupted' families. Approximately half of our upperclassmen are now enrolled in at least one Advanced



At St. Johnsbury Academy, new buildings like the Mayo Center are funded privately, which headmaster Tom Lovett (left) says generates a lot of community goodwill.



Placement course, and nearly 90 percent of the Class of 2009 planned to continue their education after graduation.”

In practical terms, this variety of opportunities can create a scenario where, according to Hilton, “one of our best poets was also our best welder.” He speaks of this philosophy as “excellence without elitism.” The breadth of study and the low student-to-teacher ratio (roughly 10 to 1 at all of the town academies) are two reasons why Lyndon and the surrounding towns continue to

designate Lyndon Institute as their high school, and why 85 percent of its students’ tuition is paid by public tax dollars. It’s also why Hilton can confidently state that, “Everyone leaves Lyndon Institute being able to do well, something worth doing.”

St. Johnsbury Academy

Just 10 miles south of Lyndon Center is one of Lyndon Institute’s fiercest rivals, St. Johnsbury Academy. In fact, while they compete with each

other in most sports, their annual football meeting is known simply as “The Game,” and determines bragging rights for the year. And while Lyndon Institute is somewhat smaller and slightly less formal than St. Johnsbury Academy, there are more similarities than differences.

Starting in the main office, St. Johnsbury Academy’s Headmaster, Tom Lovett, is, like Lyndon Institute’s Hilton, a former English teacher. In fact, he says that when the headmaster’s job opened up, he really didn’t want it: “I think Eng-

lish Department chair is the best job in the world.” But with longtime headmaster Bernier Mayo encouraging him, he applied and began his tenure in the fall of 2001. Lovett, however, continues to teach one class and describes that as one of the highlights of his day.

The other highlight of Lovett’s day is morning chapel, where he takes an active role in shaping the culture of diversity. After the Pledge of Allegiance and a values-based talk, Lovett might use his turn at the microphone as a “bully pulpit” to address those things in the school “which aren’t right.”

The school offers what Lovett describes as a “dizzying array of courses in the arts” (taught in the new Charles Hosmer Morse Center for the Arts), 22 Advanced Placement (AP) courses, a technical education center, and a wide range of sports with everything from field hockey to ice hockey.

This range of opportunities is attractive to local families. In fact, despite students from such far-ranging locations as Hong Kong and Bermuda, 45 percent of the student body comes from St. Johnsbury and neighboring towns. And while the tuition for local students is provided via tax dollars, the tuition

is lower than the actual cost to the Academy to educate them. The difference is made up through the school's annual fund and endowment. And when there is a new building, the money is raised privately, without any additional cost to taxpayers. In fact, in reference to its strong history of raising funds for capital projects, former headmaster Mayo would often put it this way: "Not one stick. Not one brick. Not one square foot of ground has been paid for with taxpayer dollars." According to Headmaster Lovett, this practice has the net result of generating a lot of goodwill.

Now in his tenth year as headmaster, Lovett is also responsible for shaping the culture of the town academy of which he has been a part since 1984. For St. Johnsbury Academy, the culture is all about inclusion, diversity and meeting the needs of every student. Lovett's approach echoes Hilton's "excellence without elitism." Lovett believes that town academies provide a model for American education and that "the comprehensive town academy is the most diverse school in America. Twenty-plus countries, twenty-plus states. Children of multi-millionaires with children of the homeless. Kids who can't read at the fifth-grade level to AP Scholars."

Burr and Burton Academy

In his 15 years at the helm (he stepped down in June 2008), Chuck Scranton promoted an admissions policy common to the town academy, embracing kids from neighboring towns and providing them with a wide range of choices. In the case of BBA, providing these opportunities required new buildings, renovated facilities and a larger endowment. The school managed these improvements to its campus without any additional cost to the taxpayers of the ten towns that send their students to the school. As Scranton pointed out, "Our independence is their greatest asset. We raised 40 million dollars in a decade to build buildings and to shore up our endowment to keep our tuition low."

The resulting facilities are impressive. The Smith Center for Science and Communication, opened in 1998, includes new science labs and computer facilities. The Jonathan Levin Center

houses a television studio, as well as a Vermont Public Radio studio. Foreign language classrooms, new art studios and a cafeteria are based in the Rowland Center, which opened in 2004. In addition, the school has added a new center and subject-specific computer labs (including a music technology lab).

The recent building surge at Burr and Burton results from a culture of philanthropy. This tradition of giving is not a new phenomenon at BBA. It began at its inception when one of the founders, Joseph Burr, a Manchester merchant and banker, was persuaded by Samuel Canfield of Arlington that he had an obligation to the people of Vermont. Canfield put it to Burr straight: "You made your



"Our results speak for themselves," says Burr and Burton headmaster Mark Tashjian. The school raised \$40 million in a decade to construct new academic buildings and to shore up its endowment.

money off Vermonters and, by gum, you ought to leave it here." Burr eventually bequeathed \$100,000 from his estate for education, including \$10,000 to found the academy.

The story of Burr and Burton, however, is not simply one of a school with a rich past; it is also the story of a school that is thriving in the present. The evidence abounds beyond the new construction, including an enrollment that doubled over Scranton's tenure, and one of the lowest dropout rates in the state—an achievement realized in part by the Target Program for those students most at risk, and through its commitment to maintaining the school's accreditation in all categories of special education. Headmaster Mark Tashjian summarizes

the school's success: "Our results speak for themselves: a graduation rate that's virtually 100 percent, an 80-plus percent college matriculation rate, AP results in the top five percent nationally, and a lot of proud students, parents and alums."

Thetford Academy

Thetford Academy's Associate Head of School, Martha Jane Rich, was also a high school English teacher. But in the years immediately preceding her tenure at Thetford, Rich was the Director of Secondary Teacher Preparation at Dartmouth College. Her focus there included teaching a course on school reform.

She laughs when she acknowledges that she had trouble getting through the textbooks: "I kept putting down the books and dreaming about what it would be like (to be a head of school)." Rather fortuitously, Thetford Academy's search for a new Head of School coincided with Rich's daydreaming. She applied for the position in the spring of 1991, and has been at the school since that fall. And while Rich stepped down in June, she remains active in a part-time role as associate head for academics. David McGinn, the longtime dean of students and athletic director, now occupies the front office.

Thetford Academy is the oldest secondary school in Vermont and the first coeducational secondary school in the state. It's also the town academy closest to the public side of the spectrum. For example, all but

a handful (less than one percent) of the students are funded by taxpayers and the school has a teachers' union. But it resembles a private school in retaining a self-appointing board of trustees and fiscal independence, something that allowed the school to.

Thetford is known for its strong service learning component. (Service learning is an approach that links academic study with work to meet community needs.) Some of TA's programs include Operation Day's Work, "a student-run national organization whose main purpose is to organize a workday in the community for students to earn funds for other children in a developing country," and Primary Partners, an elective course in which Academy juniors and



Thetford Academy is the only school in Vermont officially recognized as a National Service Learning Leader School. Martha Jane Rich (left) was headmaster from 1991 until she stepped down in June 2010; she's now the associate head of academics.

seniors mentor, instruct and play with first graders from the elementary school.

While TA is the only school in the state officially recognized as a “National Service Learning Leader School,” this philosophy of extending the school into the community (and vice versa) has been a foundation of the school since its earliest days. School trustee Tim Briglin notes that “Thetford families made timely contributions to a local town academy over the last two centuries...(it) speaks volumes about people who believe in community...the town rallied to the aid of TA when the Academy burned to the ground in the 1940s. TA contributed land to the town so that the town’s elementary school could be constructed (in the 1960s).” And while the Academy does not have the facilities the other town academies have (in fact, it is in the midst of a capital campaign to upgrade its most basic facilities), what it lacks in bricks and mortar, TA makes up for in relationships. As instructor Barb Sorenson will attest, “Because of our small-

ness, we can treat people as individuals and figure out what’s going to appeal to them.” It’s what Sorenson did in crafting Primary Partners; it’s what the administration did in creating Mountain Day in the 1970s; it’s what the late Carl Anderson did when the Academy burned to the ground and he kept the school open with less than a week’s interruption.

There’s a spirit at Thetford Academy that permeates all four academies and is summed up by Thetford Academy’s Catherine Craig (Class of 2008): “In the morning, I watch as the sun rises over the mountain view from our campus. Amidst this beauty are incredibly supportive teachers...Thetford is a small community which fosters close relationships within a beautiful environment.” And while Craig was speaking of her alma mater in the spring of her senior year, thousands of alumni from Vermont’s remaining town academies share similar memories of places where tradition still matters and where history is made every day. **7**

Just the facts

School: Burr and Burton Academy
Location: Manchester Village
Year founded: 1829
Head of School: Mark H. Tashjian
Enrollment: day students, 600 / boarding students, 50
Number of Faculty: 70
Tuition for 2010–2011: day students, \$13,725; boarding students, \$36,600
Endowment: \$12 million

School: Lyndon Institute
Location: Lyndon Center
Year founded: 1867
Head of School: Richard Hilton
Enrollment: day students, 500 / boarding students, 105
Number of Faculty: 62
Tuition for 2010-11: \$13,350 for day students, \$33,400 for seven-day boarding students, and \$23,850 for five-day boarding students.
Endowment: \$7.557 million

School: St. Johnsbury Academy
Location: St. Johnsbury
Year founded: 1842
Head of School: Thomas W. Lovett
Enrollment: day students, 700 / boarding students, 235
Number of Faculty: 130
Tuition for 2010-2011: Day students: \$13,875; boarding students, \$41,200. Good Neighbor boarding tuition to qualifying residents of Vermont, New Hampshire and Quebec, \$31,200.
Endowment: \$14.5 million

School Name: Thetford Academy
Location: Thetford Hill
Year founded: 1819
Head of School: David McGinn. Martha Jane Rich, Head of School from 1991 until 2010, has transitioned to a part-time role as Associate Head of School.
Enrollment: day students, 293 – grades 7-12 / boarding students: Launching an international student program in 2011.
Number of Faculty: 38
Tuition for 2010-2011: \$16,960
Endowment: 1.6 million