

The Chronicles of Thayer High School

By Dan Gorenstein, NHPR

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(Note: This is a transcript of an audio file that NHPR had posted on its old site)

Winchester's Thayer High School is gradually closing its doors.

In two years, the town will be without a high school.

But it wasn't too long ago that Winchester had what every community wants:

Energized teachers, engaged students, and administrators with vision.

Many educators considered the school a national model.

So what happened?

In the first of a two part series on Thayer High, New Hampshire Public Radio's Dan Gorenstein went to Winchester to find out.

Sfx: graduation

Last month Thayer High held its final graduation as a 4-year high school.

The cheers and speeches are familiar to Marcia Ammannnd.

She's heard them as a teacher, school board member, mother, and student.

It was her good high school experience that brought her home.

When I came back after college, and marriage, and teaching, I guess I pictured it would be the same for my children. And then I was pretty, taken back.

Ammannnd found a depressed town. Winchester's largest employer had closed.

Tom Carney Executive Editor of the Keene Sentinel says the unemployment was just the town's latest problem.

There are various studies that indicate it has a lot of problems that are indicators that the community is going ot have problems. High dropout rates, teenage moms, as interesting of a community as it is, it has a lot of signs of a town in trouble. Ammannnd saw that trouble reflected at the school.

I just saw chaos. I was asked to supervise a study hall and there were supposed to be 58 kids in the study and there were three?I think they were out and about?

Then school board member Marian Polaski.

...they were, in front of my house, under the trees, driving the neighbors crazy, smoking cigarettes and things, and like the cafeteria, there were holes - the tables, big holes in them, and the food on the cafeteria walls, they would just throw the food, and nobody seemed to do anything about this. It was bad.

In 1981 Thayer's principal retired.

Polaski, as a school board member, sat in on candidate interviews.

And she says they all pretty much looked alike.

With one exception, Dennis Littky.

When he came in for the interview, he wasn't in a suit and tie and jacket, like all the others were, he was just Dennis, the hair, and the wild looking beard, and he said what you see is what you get.

There wasn't a 3-piece suit in the world that could contain who he was
Again, Marcia Ammannnd.

I think people all agree that it was time for a change. But some didn't want a radical change. And he represented something very radical.

You have to change a culture in school, and as long as it was it's cool to be bad, rather than it's cool to be good, you don't have a shot. Doesn't matter a thing I do.

Dennis Littky.

He speaks from experience.

Before coming to Thayer, he'd run a Long Island high school.

Then for rules, rather than me coming in as the big principal, we spent the first three months, all together working on the rules. So the kids, and you know what, the kids always make them tougher, than we do. So it was a combination of those kinds of things.

Also looked in the building, it didn't look very good physically. So that is where we spent a fair amount of time during the summer. Hired a lot of kids, got grants to repaint it, redo. So it was beginning to represent change is coming.

Karen Thomsson was a junior in Littky's first year.

Everybody was looking at itself really differently. The whole school, just the physical building, and after we saw all the differences, we were like, wow.

Some teachers and parents were wowed too.

Littky encouraged teachers to find new ways to develop curriculum and get to know students.

He'd hold parent teacher conferences instead of sending home report cards.

He started an apprenticeship program.

I think we were a school in motion It wasn't that you came to school and went from class to class. You came back here and you did some computer work, or some research, or to write a paper, but no one ever just stayed here.

Instead students built a barn, or worked for the newspaper, or studied voter registration, or investigated a proposed landfill site.

Winchester native and current Thayer computer teacher Rick Durkey noticed an attitude shift.

Towns around Winchester would always say, Oh, your from Thayer,? as if it's an insult. The kids at Thayer also used to say it. But while D. was here, the kids at Thayer didn't say it anymore.

Soon people began using the words Thayer and national model in the same sentence.

Littky says he and his staff received countless invitations to speak about their success.

And Littky says, people also wanted to visit.

So we said, we might as well charge them. So this was way back 20 years ago, we charged them \$100 a person to walk into the school. And you know what? Once you charged, the amount of people who wanted to come to our school tripled.

But all through his time, was not a smooth time?

Retired English Teacher Valerie Cole.

...he had as many people nipping at his heels, as the principals, before and after. The kids should be in school, or how come you are taking so many field trips, what are you reading that book for, why are you doing journals in school. While Cole loved parts of the curriculum, it could be frustrating too.

Sometimes you really want to lecture, you really want to give a pen and pencil test. And sometimes you felt guilty doing it that way.

As the school's national reputation grew, Littky's critics got louder.

People complained kids didn't learn the basics, there was no apparent structure.

Littky disputed the charges.

Trouble boiled over.

It was a great story, you had an entire community consumed by this one issue...

The Keene Sentinel's Tom Carney.

... L. had become the lightning rod for this town. For every ailment this town had, L. became the lightning rod, and you were either with him or against him. You rarely get stories that galvanize a whole town to that level.

The school board attempted to fire Littky.

Littky and his supporters held their ground.

The media swarmed.

The town's struggle became fodder for a book, a made-for-TV, and news programs like CBS's W. 57th Street.

West 57th St. program

Sfx: intro music

Sound montage of critics

Littky survived the attempt to remove him.

And now, some 15 years later, he says he learned a lesson.

...so I would say, if there was any mistake I made, it would have been how to go to more pig roasts, play more ball, have more people understand me as a human being. So I was not so threatening.

Littky stayed on until 1994, leaving on his own terms.

His departure, says Marcia Ammann, one of the principal's biggest supporters, was demoralizing.

D. believed when he left, the staff was so empowered, so well versed in this whole philosophy, it would go on with their own strength, but I think we knew immediately, that the air had gone out of our lungs. It was very hard, and we came to a place where we went to the lunchroom and reminisce.

I don't think any of us can advocate that this is right for every single kid. But for crying out loud, when something works, to see it choked and killed, It's just so sad.

Thayer Science teacher Susan Romano

It's so sad that this school, this model was choked off into oblivion. Everyone is screaming right now, you read all the journals, you stay caught up with what is going on, they are all screaming about keeping kids engaged. This is a model that kept kids engaged.

Debate over what happened at Thayer continues.

Opinions and theories vary and merge.

High teacher and administrative turnover.

Leadership that didn't believe in the Littky model.

Tests and standards gained favor over experimentation.

Monadnock Assistant Superintendent Margaret Sullivan says Littky never left behind a blueprint either.

There are a lot of things that have to stay in place for to continue on in the same if the people who are remaining, don't know the model, don't believe in the model, the structure isn't there, it will change. But that isn't bad always.

That depends, says Thayer computer teacher Rick Durkey.

If you measure it by have students covered all the classic books, we are more successful. If you believe what is important is exposing kids to the world, then we are less successful.

In terms of the education that people were getting at Thayer, national model, I think that's way too strong a term.

The Keene Sentinel's Tom Carney.

I think if you look at test results, they were not that good.

Anecdotally, though, many people who experienced it seem convinced, what existed at Thayer from 1981 to 1994 was exceptional.

Thayer English teacher Peter Issensteder says sometimes his students pick up the book or watch the exaggerated TV movie about the school.

...they always ask me, why don't we do that anymore? Why don't we feel about that place the way they did then. What happened?

In 2 years Thayer will be closed.

Perhaps that was the fate of a small town high school.

But for a while, at least, according to Monadnock Superintendent Kurt Cardeen, Thayer defied the odds.

Did it deteriorate? Did it deteriorate from when he was there, my answer is yes. Did it go back to what it was before that, I think yes. And if D. hadn't come, I think what is happening now, would have happened sooner.

This spring the town voted to begin sending students to Keene for high school.

It is the second to last high school in Cheshire County to consolidate with a larger school district.

And the move has divided the town in a way that hasn't been seen here, since a red-bearded outsider became principal.

For NHPR News, I'm DG.

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Controversy Returns to Winchester's Thayer High

By Dan Gorenstein, NHPR

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(Note: This is a transcript of an audio file that NHPR had posted on its old site)

*In the past 25 years, Winchester's high school has gone through several transformations. It went from fights in the halls and high dropout rates to a nationally recognized school. Recently Thayer has flirted with losing its accreditation thanks to a crumbling building, and **poor curriculum.***

This spring the town narrowly voted to close the school, and send students to Keene. In part two of our series on Thayer High, New Hampshire Public Radio's Dan Gorenstein reports that decision remains divisive.

It was a drizzly Friday evening in June.

Winchester's Thayer High School held its last graduation as a four year school. Happy people headed for their cars, or to the local YMCA for an after graduation party chaperoned by teachers and parents of Thayer's 2003 graduating class.

English teacher Peter Issenstedder watched as people left the gym.

More people show up for this than anything else. Everybody wants to see their kids graduate... but I don't think you will get something as intimate and heart felt when these kids are someplace else.

Graduating classes tend to be smaller than 50 students.

But the gym, which seats 700 people, is usually packed.

Town native Karen Thompson is the mother of a graduate, and former Thayer High teacher, and herself a graduate.

...graduates, I am guessing 600 people. People getting in at 5pm to make sure they have a good seat ... grandparents giving scholarships to their grandchild. Families of lost loved ones giving scholarships to students who may have been similar to the loved one they lost.

I think it was bittersweet b/c of it being the last year as a complete school... I think a lot of people sat in that room thinking, wow this is it. This is the last time we are going to see a graduation like this at T.

Marcia Ammannnd went to Thayer.

So did her children.

She's been on the school board, and is on the school's staff.

I watched the band march and the uniforms and knowing how much it took to get the money into the budget for those uniforms, and that is such a wonderful sound, and feeling sad.

...art show sound

Kevin Whippy acknowledges the town's children will lose some of the benefits of a small town high school.

...but is it worth that, than not having physics, chemistry, I don't think so...

Whippy says some people are making too much of Thayer's closing.

...a lot is made up of this is the heart of the town. If you go to the b-ball games, there is 100 people at most you go to a baseball game, there are 20 people, you go to a soccer game there is none...

...it's a school in trouble.

The Keene Sentinel's Executive Editor Tom Carney.

...There aren't enough textbooks to go around, the textbooks are old, the town is too poor to buy the stuff it needs to fund an adequate education. The building is falling apart, has been for years.

Assistant Superintendent Margaret Sullivan.

...violations to the fire code, the electric code, asbestos problems...the rooms, b/c they were built in 1922, have one outlet. And we can't use extension cords.

... it's a depressed atmosphere...And that's not good for the kids. They need to be exposed to positive things, positive surroundings, positive people, and expanded curriculum. That's Meredith Galleano.

...they need to have good science labs, good home economics, they deserve that. Kids in W. deserve that just as much as kids in Marlboro, Chesterfield and that is what K. offers.

That argument has won the day.

As of this fall Winchester's 9th graders will start attending Keene High School.

But not everyone in town is happy with that decision.

Karen Thompson agrees, local students deserve better than they are getting at Thayer.

But she believes Winchester can offer it.

I don't have all the answers but strong administration, empowering, given kids opportunities...we've done it before. We've done it, and done it, and done it.

The school has had success.

Most recently, from 1981 through 1994, principal a principal named Dennis Littky put Thayer on the map.

People moved to town to enroll their kids in Thayer.

Educators paid \$100 dollars to visit.

Thayer's teachers traveled around the country talking about their success and training other teachers in their methods.

The Keene Sentinel's Tom Carney.

...it had a lot more energy, it had a lot more innovative things, they had apprenticeships, they worked with businesses. There was a real effort at Thayer to show the kids there was more to the world than they had seen.

During that time, the school had its critics.

Some townspeople tried to remove Littky as principal.

The story became the subject of news reports, a book, and a TV movie.

But in 1994 on his own terms, Dennis Littky left, and according to some, so did the school's sparkle.

...at this point, even as hard as we work, we can't give them all that we were able to give them ten years ago.

Marcia Ammannnd.

...And it's not just academics, and it's not just spirit, and it's not just emotional support. It's pieces of all those things that aren't there now.

If the school isn't performing, if the town won't increase taxes to improve Thayer, Meredith Galleano wonders why not embrace Keene as an excellent option.

... I just I just feel that some people, it's human nature. We like what is comfortable but I am telling you that is not what we need to teach our kids. We need to teach our kids that sometimes you have to do things in life that are not as comfortable, you have to stretch yourself. And you try some things and you find out that you have even more going on then you thought you did, you will grow as a person.

...she moved to this town two years ago she obviously looked at the school system before she

moved here' if she didn't like it, she should have moved to K. You don't move to a town and try to change things, you just don't do that.

That's Beth Marsh, Karen Thompson's 18-year old daughter.

Marsh's scorn for Galleano is reminiscent.

Some 15 years ago, Littky faced similar contempt over his new ideas about education.

It was Marsh's mother, who embraced that change Littky brought to the small town.

His influence on Thompson was so great; her daughter invited the former principal to her graduation this June.

Thompson steps in to explain her daughters outburst.

...out of my little journal from D. he wrote, pioneers are never popular. Pioneers try new things. Is Meredith Galleano trying to try new things? It's not new.

Almost all of the towns around Winchester have decided to send their students to consolidated school districts.

But some people in Winchester were nervous.

So in an attempt to calm fears, Galleano helped arrange 3 tours of Keene High.

The principal and teachers were on hand to answer questions.

No more than 12 people ever showed up.

I was disappointed that more people didn't take advantage of it, b/c before you make a decision, make an educated decision. Have a look at it, have enough of an open mind to look at it. I just think that is a shame.

Why didn't people at least look at it?

Karen Thompson.

...as the book said, their roots are deep. And this is where they belong. And K. doesn't make any sense to them. And as adults, why would they put themselves into a situation that would make their children's lives any better. I wouldn't go. And I am an educated person. I feel like I believe in diversity and allowing my kids to have opportunity. K. is not a place I want to go take a tour of. And not b/c it's a bad place, but b/c it's not right for my child.

Marcia Ammannnd.

...(why didn't people go visit K) I guess it just makes you feel disloyal, to your own school. To your own place, to your own roots. to say, it is better, and the only thing we can do, or to close down the school so casually.

Besides a sense of disloyalty, something else is going on.

Deserved or not, it seems Winchester has a bad reputation.

That's something Galleano discovered when she moved to town.

... I started hearing all the terrible slurs about W. which I personally feel most of them are unfair. But I realize there was a stigma ... b/c of the schools, b/c of some other things.

And Thayer science teacher Susan Romano fears that reputation will be tough to shake.

...people will always look for ways to nurture prejudice against each other. Well, up here, they divide with these socio-economic barriers. So our kids end up with a stigma. And that's what they carry into these schools. It's not that they walk in the door and are immediately on an equal footing.

Just because Keene is more affluent, says Marcia Ammannnd, doesn't mean the kids will be outcasts.

... I don't see how coming from W. is going to hurt them. ...I don't see a big bus rolling up to school with a big sign that says Winchester on it.

The story isn't over yet.

There may be an opportunity to bring another high school to Winchester, or even to resurrect Thayer.

The Monadnock School District has received federal money that allows communities to pitch specialized schools that would be open to kids from all over the region.

Former Thayer principal Dennis Littky says it could ease some of the anger in Winchester.

..let's say you built a school for 100 high school kids, it may be perfect, it would allow the kids who want to stay in W. to stay in W. and allow the 100 who want to go to K. to go to K. and that may be the best...it's not as great as having your own school, but it still keeps identity for the people that want that identity.

What should a small community do when it's offered a chance to send its students to a high school with higher test scores, a better reputation, and more extra curricular activities? Should it give up the excellent student to teacher ratio, the walk to campus, the graduations full of kids from a town where anybody knows everybody?

Neither decision is just right.

Assistant Superintendent Margaret Sullivan..

...when you leave something to go to something else, there is always a wonderful something else you are going to, but there is also a wonderful something you are leaving behind too. And I think that's the story.

As of this fall, 9th graders from Winchester will join students from Chesterfield, Harrisville, Marlborough, Marlow, Nelson, Stoddard, Westmoreland, and of course Keene.

Thayer High School will graduate two more classes before it closes.

For NHPR News, I'm DG.