# Paradigm Shift in Public Education:

# Ridge and Valley Charter School 2000 - 2014

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ABSTRACT

Paradigm Shift in Public Education:
Ridge and Valley Charter School 2000 – 2014

D. Litt. Dissertation by

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The dissertation examines the founding and first ten years of operation of Ridge and Valley Charter School, Blairstown, New Jersey, a kindergarten through eighth grade public charter school committed to ecological literacy and sustainability: "education for a hopeful sustainable future." Within the context of the establishment and purpose of charter schools in the United States and in New Jersey, the project asserts that Ridge and Valley Charter School is successful in offering public school choice to families, fostering innovation in public education, contributing to the establishment of new forms of accountability for schools, and providing new professional opportunities for teachers, goals of the New Jersey Charter School Program Act of 1995. Qualitative research methods of phenomenology, ethnography, and case study augment quantitative review of data to present a comprehensive view of the motivation and philosophy of the school's foundation, its practical manifestation from 2000 – 2014, and the effect of the Ridge and Valley experience on its founders, trustees, and graduates. A chronology of the school's development and analysis of its performance to date are based on information from public records including annual School Report Cards published by the NJ Department of Education, minutes from Ridge and Valley Charter School (RVCS) board of trustees meetings 2000 – 2014, local and RVCS publications, and RVCS official correspondence. Interviews with founders and alumni conducted for this project add personal perspectives to the public record and contribute to a holistic picture of the school's evolution and impact. The practice of non-hierarchical governance based on PeerSpirit circle practice employed throughout the school is presented in detail, reflecting its important role in the school's development. Review of internal and external assessment data demonstrates challenges of assessing unconventional practice with conventional assessment instruments. Suggestions for additional or alternative assessments appropriate to the mission of Ridge and Valley Charter School are presented.

Keywords: Charter school, ecological literacy, non-hierarchical governance, PeerSpirit circle practice, assessment.

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# INTRODUCTION

In Blairstown, New Jersey, in the spring of 2000 I joined a small group of parents, educators, and community activists who shared a dream. Through our exposure to the work of cultural historian Thomas Berry and other visionary proponents of ecological literacy, we recognized that the challenge of our time is to engender a fundamental shift in human beings' relationship to the earth in order to initiate a new understanding of human identity and purpose. In *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*, Berry summarizes:

> The present human situation can be described in three sentences:
>
> In the twentieth century, the glory of the human has become the desolation of the earth.
>
> The desolation of the earth is becoming the destiny of the human.
>
> All human institutions, professions, programs, and activities must now be judged primarily by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore, or foster a mutually-enhancing human-earth relationship. (166)

In place of the current human-earth model of domination, exploitation, and separation which undermines the vitality of our planet, a new paradigm to foster

mutually-enhancing relationships is necessary for our species and our home to survive and thrive (Berry, *Dream* 3). To foster the significant shift in consciousness and behavior demanded by this challenge, the Ridge and Valley Charter School founders dreamed of preparing children to be leaders of that future, of the conscious evolution of the human species. We imagined a school to embrace the challenge: education for a hopeful sustainable future.

Fourteen years later, under the auspices of the New Jersey Department of Education, Ridge and Valley Charter School is in its tenth year of operation. The school serves 128 children from kindergarten to eighth grade, with waiting lists for enrollment in some grades. There are 85 alumni. Four of the seven members of the Class of 2013 attended RVCS from kindergarten through eighth grade, the first class able to have done so. Of the twenty-one full-time faculty ("guides"), fourteen have achieved tenure, satisfactory completion of at least three consecutive one-year contracts. Three guides are members of the founding faculty and eleven have taught at Ridge and Valley for five or more years, a significant staff retention rate in charter school employment, which can be volatile. Two founders, including myself, remain among the current eight volunteer members of the board of trustees (the school board); four trustees have served five or more years.

Since the 2004 opening, the school's finances have been strong, with the organization operating continuously in the black as required by state law; providing acceptable salaries and benefits to retain a highly-qualified professional staff; maintaining comfortable, spacious, and well-equipped facilities on a rural

property (see fig. 1); and accruing a modest annual fund balance. Our debt to asset ratio is .55 for fiscal year 2012, with current assets of $2,439,726.00 (including the 17+-acre property, seven permanently-installed modular classroom buildings, infrastructure, equipment, etc.) to current liabilities of $1,347,716 for mortgages on the property and the solar panels. Thanks to the efforts of the RVCS Finance Committee, the debt service coverage ratio, which compares the school's net income, depreciation, and interest expense to its loan payments, is 18.18 for FY 2011 (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *2012*).

Fig. 1. Aerial photo of Ridge and Valley Charter School *c.* 2011, courtesy of pilot Will McNulty (RVCS class of 2011). Two additional modular classroom buildings were added in 2012.

After rigorous review by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE), the initial four-year charter of 2004 was successfully renewed for five years each in 2008 and 2013. The most recent renewal in 2013, however, was accompanied by a one-year period of academic probation, the criteria for,

remediation of, and response to which is discussed in Chapter Five[1]. It is notable that 32 of the 87 charter schools in New Jersey, 36%, are currently on probation or in pre-probation warning status, due in part to new accountability standards recently adopted in partnership with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Ten charter schools have been closed since 2011 due to problems in academic achievement, governance, or finance (State of New Jersey Department of Education, "Department of Education Approves Six New Charter Schools").

In 2012, Ridge and Valley was the only K-8 elementary school among the middle and high schools chosen to pilot the innovative Gates Foundation-funded Big History Project online social studies curriculum, which closely echoes RVCS' existing framework and curricular context (Big History). Articles showcasing the innovative educational activities of RVCS students appear frequently in local publications, and the school, its unique curriculum, and practice of non-hierarchical governance have been featured in two published books: *The Literacy Leadership Handbook: Best Practices for Developing Professional Literacy Communities* by Cindy Lassonda and RVCS guide Kristine C. Tucker and *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea. Despite the ongoing challenges of pursuing fundamental change within a conservative and bureaucratic system, Ridge and Valley Charter School continues to evolve. No matter what the future holds *vis-à-vis* the Department of Education's academic probation, the school's founding vision of paradigm shift in

[1] Ridge and Valley Charter School's probationary status was removed by the Department of Education in March 2014.

public education exemplifies the intention of the New Jersey Charter School Program Act of 1995 to foster innovation in public education. 2014, RVCS Year Ten, is an appropriate occasion for review.

In “Cosmology 2011”, mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme asserts that every human culture organizes itself around stories, relying on “cultural symbols to orient themselves toward what is real and what truly matters” (Swimme, “Cosmology”). The story of Ridge and Valley Charter School is intrinsically connected to what is real and what truly matters: the ongoing interrelationship of humans and our ecosystem. By envisioning alternatives, the school’s founders determined to offer a fundamental challenge to the values of hierarchy, domination, submission, and exploitation the current *status quo* promotes in our species and the natural world. What does a hopeful sustainable future look like? What kind of a public elementary school empowers children to create it? Constant reflection on and reference to that fundamental vision directed and motivated years of effort in multiple arenas—articulation of foundational principles (“non-negotiables”), community organization, navigation of educational bureaucracy, financial planning, real estate development, grant writing and administration, litigation, curriculum development, public policy, personnel, recruitment, public relations, *etc. etc.* It became apparent to the founding group that our achievements (and the perseverance to attain them) were closely connected to our own model of non-hierarchical, collaborative, mutually-enhancing relationships. The principles of PeerSpirit circle practice

focused our collaboration and supported our individual development in self-reflective ways of communicating.

Non-hierarchical circle process was critical to all of our successes. The founders would contend that without circle, Ridge and Valley Charter School would not exist, that the power of peer collaboration through circle gave us the means to achieve the impossible. This project documents the unfolding of the school as one model of social and educational change, recording the challenges, setbacks, and successes of many dedicated people contributing to an innovative vision of public education. Background and explanation of the values, policies, and practices currently alive in the school offer orientation for other groups committed to systemic change, and to those Ridge and Valley community members joining the school's evolution after the founding years. Cooperating as peers, modeling shared values of mutually-enhancing relationships, personal responsibility, and leadership from every chair led to the creation of the first public school based on the paradigm-shifting principles and implications of ecological literacy and sustainability. Ridge and Valley Charter School is realizing a vision of education for a hopeful sustainable future, both for the children and for the adults, based on a model of mutually-enhancing relationships in an ecosystemic context.

A core value of the school is self-directed lifelong learning through experiential, integrated activities, motivated by an ethic of excellence. The founders' and trustees' work with the school models this real-life, project-based education. When the effort began, the founders knew little about New Jersey

educational law, administrative code, and policy; few of them were familiar with buying or selling commercial real estate, with terms and conditions of commercial mortgages and township planning, zoning, and administration. Collectively, the group had some experience with budgeting, fundraising, and grant-writing for not-for-profit organizations, but no one had established a functioning alternative public school with no funds at all. None of the founding trustees had ever committed to working in a group with consciously articulated values of collaboration and practices of communication to accomplish a complex and important long-term, visionary project. None had created a school from nothing but exciting ideas, tenacity, and hard work. It has been a peak learning experience for all of us, and, in itself, demonstrates realization of the school's vision of integrated, experiential education.

Many groundbreaking, mission-oriented organizations fail to survive more than ten years. As founders move on and new people join, there is the potential for "mission drift" away from the original vision, misunderstanding or misinterpretation of founding ideas, and loss of leadership with personal experience of and commitment to the group's continuing evolution. This project captures a picture of the development of Ridge and Valley Charter School to date, through the lens of the founding vision and institutional assessment based on internal and external criteria. My own experience and the many resources shared by the founders, trustees, and guides offer background and explanation for the values, policies, and practices that guide RVCS. It reviews the New Jersey Department of Education assessments of Ridge and Valley so far,

including the criteria for the 2013-14 academic probation and its resolution, and considers the relevance of additional or alternative assessments to the school's continued development. Finally, there is the personal story of the power and joy of cooperating with dedicated, like-minded others. Shared values of non-hierarchical relationships, personal responsibility, and leadership from every chair helped us to articulate and realize a vision of paradigm shift in public education.

## Chapter One: The Project

The majority of American children participate in formal elementary education from ages five to thirteen; the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences of this period influence every aspect of their subsequent lives. Even brief reflection on personal experience demonstrates how formative and important this childhood learning is, and how, taken collectively, it can shape the community's future (Berry, *Dream* 90). In 1999, challenged by evidence of humans' role in increasingly destructive imbalances in the planetary ecosystem and aware of the long-term impact today's children will have on the earth and its communities, a group of parents and teachers committed to developing a model of education that consciously engages with the issues of our time. For the founders and for the school, education for a hopeful sustainable future relies on revising fundamental assumptions about human relationships–with the earth, with other species, and with each other. The founders believe that shifting existing relationship models away from domination and exploitation to mutual enhancement is a fundamental step in increasingly necessary paradigmatic

change. Through years of study, reflection, conscious practice, and practical effort, the group explored the significant implications and embraced the formidable challenges of manifesting this vision in public elementary education. In 2004, Ridge and Valley Charter School opened in Blairstown, New Jersey, welcoming its first students to temporary facilities in a local camp. Ten years later, teens who began at RVCS as five–year-olds on the first day in 2004 graduated in a school-wide ceremony on the 17+-acre campus, joining more than 75 previous alumni. As the first graduates complete college and begin careers, the initial impact of this radical re-visioning of education can be examined.

Much has been written about New Jersey charter schools since their establishment in 1995, and public opinion continues to be polarized on the mission-based, alternative public schools. In December 2013, there were 87 approved charter schools operating in New Jersey, with enrollment of more than 30,000 students across the state. Of these charter schools, 36% are currently on probation or in pre-probation warning status, a record number that reflects increased scrutiny and new benchmarks for charter school achievement (Calefati, “N.J. Education”). Current Governor Chris Christie and Commissioner of Education Christopher Cerf declare strong support for the model, while the New Jersey Education Association, the union of the majority of New Jersey public school teachers, remains unconvinced that public schools of choice contribute positively to the New Jersey school system (Karp). Public perception tends to characterize charter schools as primarily serving economically-disadvantaged populations in historically underperforming urban school districts,

charters as “rescue schools” whose structured approach to academic achievement usually reflects traditional methodologies. For many of these schools, successes are measured primarily in standardized test results (the Department of Education’s metric of choice), high school graduation, and college admissions. Indeed, the majority of New Jersey’s charter schools fit the rescue school model, whether operating fully independently, associated with other charters through a distinctive program such as KIPP Schools (Knowledge is Power Program), or directly administered by an Educational Management Organization such as EdisonLearning. Information on the successes and struggles of these schools is widely available (Resmovits). This project focuses on an aspect of the New Jersey charter school program that has not received as much attention: educational innovation, as exemplified by Ridge and Valley Charter School. Its fundamental goal is to prepare children for a radically different—and better—world: a hopeful sustainable future. The evolution of Ridge and Valley Charter School to date offers one model of how a foundation of non-hierarchical collaboration—“leadership from every chair”—can be highly effective within existing structures and result in practical, real-world achievement of specific outcomes in service to visionary goals. The RVCS story presents an attempt to fundamentally shift the conventional assumptions about children, relationships, education, and the future and to transform that vision into reality. Doing this within the context of New Jersey’s public education system is a formidable challenge. Circle practice and the accompanying expectations of personal responsibility, self-control and reflection continue to be critical to the

success of the school at all levels. It's apparent to any visitor at a trustee meeting or whole-school assembly, to a new guide greeting students for the first time, to the charter renewal review team from the Department of Education: changing relationships changes everything. Though by no means experts, the regular folks at RVCS—students, families, guides, and trustees—use circle to work together differently, with very constructive results, and within larger cultural contexts that promote quite different values.

To present the model, significant sources in education, group process, and philosophy, as well as informant interviews conducted in 2012 and public documents specifically associated with Ridge and Valley Charter School are relied upon. Methods in educational and sociological research inform the use of participant responses and lived experience by the participant-researcher and offer flexibility in presentation and analysis. The RVCS experience suggests that questioning conventional assumptions–about teaching and learning; about education, assessment, and public schools; about people and how we work together–can lead to innovative responses and satisfying personal and professional achievements.

In this chapter, the thesis of the study is presented: that through the transformative power of circle practice, Ridge and Valley Charter School is successful in embodying a vision of education for a hopeful sustainable future and exemplifying the intention of the New Jersey Charter School Program Act of 1995, promoting innovation in public education. The dissertation highlights the most significant research and sources of information from outside the school and

explains the methodologies employed to present a multi-faceted view of the school's foundation and operation. The potential significance of this project for some different audiences is described. Chapter Two: Charter Schools: U.S. and New Jersey, provides background to the charter school concept and history in the nation and state. Chapter Three: The Ridge and Valley Charter School Story explains the founding philosophy, foundational principles, and the five main components of the RVCS mission: mutually-enhancing relationships, outdoor learning, and experiential, integrated, differentiated education. A narrative chronology of the school's history is illustrated by reflections of founders and graduates from the 2012 interviews and accompanied by a summary of the NJ Department of Education assessment for each year. Chapter Four: Circle Practice at Ridge and Valley Charter School provides background to PeerSpirit circle practice, which has been the governance and group collaboration model for RVCS. The challenges of integrating alternative models and practices into existing structures, particularly that of New Jersey's hierarchical system of public education and assessment of academic success based solely on standardized test scores, is addressed in Chapter Five. Information excerpted from 2013 surveys of RVCS students and alumni suggest that scores on the state-required annual standardized tests, the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK), present a limited picture of Ridge and Valley Charter School student achievement, not only in high school and college, but also in each of the five components of the mission.

## Influential Sources

To present a model of transformative innovation in public school, the project relies on significant sources in education, group process, and philosophy, as well as informant interviews and public documents specifically associated with Ridge and Valley Charter School. The concepts and implications of evolutionary cosmology and ecological literacy are central to the school's ethos. Any discussion of the mission of Ridge and Valley Charter School must refer to the work of cultural historian Thomas Berry and mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme, who explore a vision of a radically transformed human-earth community. In works such as *The Dream of the Earth* (Berry 1988), *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (Swimme and Berry 1992), and *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (Berry 1999), the authors combine narrative forms, scientific data, cultural history, and mathematical projections to illustrate a planetary ecosystem at a turning point. These visionaries and others like them, from founding RVCS trustee Miriam MacGillis, O.P. to ecological artist and filmmaker Neil Rogin, challenge humans of the 21st century to reconsider assumptions in order to reinvent ourselves and our relationships with the earth and each other. Many of these radical thinkers inspire the work of the school and contribute to this project.

In addition to concepts of the "New Story" or "New Cosmology," such as those proposed by Berry and Swimme, the ideas of educational innovators including Rudolf Steiner, Maria Montessori, Grant Wiggins, and Alfie Kohn

contribute to the philosophy and practices of RVCS and the study. Their visions of children and perspectives on formal education, teaching, learning, educational design, pedagogy, and community are highly respected and frequently applied in alternative education communities, though relatively few American public schools employ the tenets and practices of these mentors. Philosophies including Positive Discipline, learner-centered education, differentiated instruction, authentic assessment, and non-violent communication are widely praised among educators, but rarely practiced consistently on a school- or district-wide basis. Ridge and Valley Charter School is rare in attempting to develop and maintain a comprehensive, integrated educational program that incorporates this distinctive combination of ideas within a public elementary school.

*Calling the Circle* by Christina Baldwin and *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* by Baldwin and Ann Linnea articulate the fundamental principles, practices, and agreements of circle practice in the PeerSpirit model. In fact, *The Circle Way* contains a chapter describing ongoing collaboration of Ridge and Valley Charter School and PeerSpirit trainers, with four of the founders sharing perspectives on how circle supported the efforts from the earliest years. In addition to Baldwin's seminal texts, "Calling on Spirit: An Interpretive Ethnography of PeerSpirit Circles as Transformative Process," a 2005 dissertation for Fielding Graduate University by PeerSpirit trainer Dr. Sarah MacDougall, provides important contextual information. Through case study and analysis of several groups consciously participating in PeerSpirit circle process, MacDougall illustrates the powerful impact (positive and negative) that it can

have on relationships and outcomes. Dr. MacDougall has provided onsite professional development in circle process to Ridge and Valley Charter School founders, trustees, guides, students, families, and community on several occasions since 2001; her support of the school through this work has also contributed to this project. Beyond these few texts, the literature base on PeerSpirit circle practice over time is limited. There are anecdotal accounts of community groups and some other institutions employing circle, but few reports of the same group over extended time periods and using circle in the highly-bureaucratic context of public education. This suggests an examination of circle practice as a foundational element of a public elementary school may enhance existing scholarship and contribute to development of further research in this area. Interesting work by practitioners and consultants such as Matthias zur Bonsen of the German organization All in One Spirit, and accounts of circle practice specifically applied in law enforcement situations for the purpose of restorative justice (*Circle in the Square: Building Community and Repairing Harm in School* by Nancy Riestenberg, for example) offer related applications of the process, though with different goals than the practical ongoing administration of a public institution based on the circle.

To relate the RVCS story, methods in educational and sociological research inform my use of documents, participant responses, and lived experience as a participant-researcher. A wide range of data include reports and assessments published by the New Jersey Department of Education, public records maintained by the school, and publications and correspondence in

various forms by members of the school community. There are, however, some constraints. New Jersey Public Law 2001, c. 404, *The Open Public Records Act*, applies to all public bodies, including charter schools and charter school boards of trustees. The Act delineates the type, contents, and accessibility of all records and guarantees that most of the deliberations and all actions of school boards are accessible to the public and available for public review. The exceptions to public access include personnel details of individual employees, identifying information about specific students, pending legal situations, and emerging decisions about which the premature release of information could compromise the body's ability to conduct its business effectively. Operating under the conditions of the *Open Public Meetings Act* since its inception, Ridge and Valley Charter School has a wealth of data in the public sphere. Materials consulted for this project include approved board minutes, financial records, and resolutions; official communications and publications (paper and electronic) of Ridge and Valley Charter School; the initial charter application and two applications for renewal; Annual Reports 2004 - 2012; 2013 Academic Probation Remediation plan; 2013 RVCS Student and Alumni Survey Report; and NJDOE assessment reports, including Adequate Yearly Progress, School Performance Data, and School Report Cards 2004 – present. For the school archives and to support future research, an electronic appendix accompanies the project and contains electronic copies of many of these resources.

## Methodology

The unique vision and evolution of Ridge and Valley Charter School is reflected in the telling of its story. Reporting the many facets of the effort requires a multidimensional approach; no one methodology can represent the range of this experience. From the visionary to the practical, the RVCS story encompasses numbers and dreams, requiring both quantitative and qualitative assessment. The project employs the qualitative research methodologies of phenomenology, ethnography, and case study. Two characteristics of these traditions that are particularly relevant are the 1) in-depth analysis of data from multiple sources acquired through extensive field study, and 2) the role of the participant-observer. Lived experience is one aspect of the field study, in addition to formal data collection methods and traditional research practices. Review and analysis of Ridge and Valley's formative years is a complex topic well-suited to the emergent, intuitive interpretation of data employed in qualitative analysis by a participant-researcher. The literary and informal reporting approach of these traditions lends itself to story-telling, especially appropriate in this context. The story of Ridge and Valley Charter School, even an initial overview of the founding period and first years, may contribute to understanding innovation in education and paradigm shift in groups and institutions, as well as present the myriad practical challenges of starting a charter school.

As a founder and trustee of a public school, however, requirements of confidentiality apply to this research and researcher, particularly in relation to personnel, individual students and families, and litigation or potential litigation

involving the school. In respect of this, the author relies mainly on the public record provided by the school's correspondence with the Department of Education, *Annual Reports* and approved official minutes of trustee meetings[2].

In addition, trustees' role in day-to-day operation of a functioning school is strictly limited. Board members are tasked to articulate a vision and offer leadership and guidance in support of that vision, not to micro-manage how professionals run the school. Ultimately, the responsibility for all actions and decisions regarding the school rests with the trustees. Practically, trustees approve the budget and all expenditures, curriculum, hiring, and policy, and participate in discussion of practical decisions as requested by the school staff. In the early years of any start-up, trustees naturally take on more of the daily operations than when the institution is fully staffed, as was the case with Ridge and Valley. Of necessity, then, presentation of events in the daily life of the school after 2004 are colored with the perspective of a parent of students in the school and of a trustee, for whom confidentiality law limits knowledge of specific details of some aspects of the operation and strictly controls what may be shared publicly.

Many characteristics of the qualitative inquiry methods of phenomenology, ethnography, and case study complement research into the first years of Ridge and Valley Charter School and serve the goal of an initial understanding of the institution itself and of the transformative power of its circle collaboration. The scope of this study, for example, does not include comparison to other alternative

[2] As for myself, I continue to play a part in this story, and recognize the limits that role imposes. I think that Ridge and Valley Charter School so far demonstrates significant progress toward its founding vision; that view inevitably affects my selection of the events to relate.

and/or charter schools. The methodologies of phenomenology, ethnography, and case study define parameters of time, place, and scope of inquiry. The "bounded system" so defined for this study is limited in scope to the years 2000 – 2014, from four years prior to the school's opening in 2004 to spring 2014, Year Ten of operation. The locus of the research is centered in northwest New Jersey, including the community of Genesis Farm, the Community Supported Garden at Genesis Farm, and Ridge and Valley Charter School at 1234 State Route 94, Frelinghuysen Township. The subjects of the study are those involved with the school's founding and early years of operation as founders, trustees, guides, students, families, local community members, and officials of the New Jersey Department of Education. The interviews and focus groups conducted in spring 2012 included the school's founding trustees and volunteer participants from among the school's alumni to 2011; the 2013 student and alumni surveys included current students and alumni from 2004 through 2013. By combining aspects of the qualitative research traditions, a holistic view, rich in context, results from empirical, field-oriented observations by the informants, including me, the researcher (Stake 47). Qualitative inquiry is interpretive and uses an emergent, responsive design (which for me encompasses narrative and poetic genres). Qualitative research relies on intuition and attention to the interaction of researcher and subject, in addition to informants' perceived intention and frame of reference. Professor Robert Stake characterizes qualitative study as "a labor of love" (46); that is certainly appropriate for this project. One challenge is simply addressing thirteen years of empirical, field-oriented observations.

The dimensions of focus, discipline origin, data collection, data analysis, and narrative form, are important in qualitative inquiry, including phenomenology, ethnography (particularly as used in education) and case study. Phenomenology and ethnography describe essential aspects of the experiences of adults and children and trace significant cultural behavior of those associated with the school since its founding who chose to participate in the interviews (Creswell 65). Characteristics of case study research also apply to the contained "case" of the school's early years.

A review of the approaches, intentions, and methods of these traditions establish parameters for the research project in preparation for analyzing data, particularly the responses of RVCS founders, trustees, and graduates collected in interviews and surveys. In the comprehensive *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among the Five Traditions*, Professor John Creswell describes qualitative research as "multimethod in focus" and undertaken "in a natural setting, where the researcher is an instrument of data collection who gathers words or pictures, analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes a process that is expressive and persuasive in language" (14). Denzin and Lincoln characterize the "interpretive, naturalistic" approach as trying to make sense of phenomena based on the responses and reactions people bring to them and utilizing a range of empirical materials, including interview, personal experience, and historical records (qtd. In Creswell 15).

For the researcher, qualitative inquiry requires a commitment to extensive time in the field, collecting extensive data, gaining access to empirical materials, developing rapport with informants, and adopting an "insider" perspective (Creswell 16)[3].

Creswell indicates several compelling reasons for qualitative research, including a research question asking *how* or *what* rather than the *why* of quantitative methods (17). This is surely relevant to the question of how Ridge and Valley Charter School does or does not reflect its founding vision, and how circle practice contributed to its development. In addition, qualitative methods suit complex topics that previously have not been explored in detail, are best examined within a natural setting, have numerous variables not always immediately apparent, and lack existing specifically relevant theoretical models (Creswell 17). As the first study of this innovative public elementary school, identification of some of the variables and an overview of the school and its history based on qualitative methods will establish a baseline for future inquiry in many areas.

A receptive audience for qualitative research is also necessary to the success of a project, and the multidisciplinary, inquiry-based, liberal arts philosophy of Drew University's Doctor of Letters program complements this style. Other potential audiences are likely to be engaged by the accessibility of

[3] My unique role of the researcher here both simplifies and complicates data collection. As one of the founders, I've been "in the field" for the entire period under consideration. My access to empirical materials, rapport with informants, and insider perspective are unprecedented in connection to Ridge and Valley Charter School. However, my participatory status necessarily reflects personal bias consciously and unconsciously affecting every aspect of the study. Acknowledging the benefits and limitations of the complex researcher-participant-informant identity is particularly important in relation to my data analysis and interpretation.

many elements of qualitative research. Members of the general public interested in charter schools or in this specific school, those who have been directly involved with Ridge and Valley Charter School, or people curious about foundational elements including non-hierarchical collaboration, ecological literacy, and experiential pedagogy may also find the narrative style and presentation and interpretation of data accessible. Perhaps the most compelling criterion for qualitative research for this particular Ridge and Valley story is the emphasis on the researcher's role "as an *active learner* who can tell the story from the participants' point of view rather than as an 'expert' who passes judgment on participants" (Creswell 18). The author's role as participant-observer is recognized and incorporated, and constitutes one more facet of the learning process.

RVCS grew from the vision and effort of a small volunteer group, as many innovative institutions do. I was a member of the founding group, and have been intimately involved since then with the genesis of the school and school community. It has been a life-changing personal and educational journey. The intention in conducting the study is to present a story of that journey, share the transformative experience of working in the circle context, and examine the assessment process of the school's authorizer.

## Significance

Reviewing the wisdom traditions, contemporary research, and fundamental assumptions that guided Ridge and Valley Charter School's design

offers orientation to the original vision articulated by the school's founders and provides criteria to assess progress. The RVCS experience has potential significance for multiple audiences. Community groups of any kind who want to interact differently, to eschew Robert's Rules of Order and gavel-banging hierarchy, but still need to get things done in a professional, reasonable, and timely manner may be intrigued by the effectiveness and satisfaction RVCS circle groups experience. Alternative educators might see common threads in their own experiences and may be interested in how the school addresses the inevitable challenges of applying and assessing innovative methods and checking progress on goals far beyond a specific benchmark on a standardized test. Traditional educators who may feel frustrated by the options open to them in most public school settings, where from-the-top imperatives can contradict their own instincts and experience of how children learn, may feel inspired to see alternatives alive within the public school system. Educational researchers, particularly of charter schools, may be curious about a charter committed to fundamental innovation in all aspects of the elementary program, distinct among many charter schools intensively employing traditional methods. Members of the RVCS community-- past, present, and future--may be surprised and gratified to recognize the commitment and integrity of the effort that unites them. Most importantly, individuals who believe a hopeful sustainable future includes a shift in how humans regard ourselves and our relationships with each other, other species, and the Earth may be encouraged to consider practical and satisfying

ways they, too, can engage with each other and with the critical issues of our time. In *The Great Work*, Thomas Berry claims our mission is nothing less than

> 1) To reinvent the human
>
> 2) at the species level
>
> 3) with critical reflection
>
> 4) within the community of life systems
>
> 5) in a time-developmental context
>
> 6) by means of story
>
> 7) and shared dream experience. (Berry, *Great Work* 168)

Here is one attempt to contribute to that work.

## Interlude: Morning Assembly

It's February 2006, 8:45 on a cloudy Wednesday morning in Blairstown. Children and adults chatter in from the curve of the parking lot, locating hats and gloves, juggling backpacks and lunch boxes, shouting greetings and stamping off snow. Thirty minutes later, I'm in the corner of moms and younger siblings cross-legged on the floor of the Community Room, facing the hundred or so students and guides that comprise Ridge and Valley Charter School. The adults are not immediately apparent-just slightly larger sets of jeans, hiking boots, and fleece jackets among the circle. There's not a lot of audible chatter from the kids, but I sense anticipation and calm, the feeling that they're waiting for a familiar

pleasure. The Wednesday morning school-wide assembly may include music and singing, performances of various kinds by students or guests, presentations by classes or student groups to share current work or recognize recent accomplishments, seasonal celebrations, yoga, movement, and breathing, or any number of other activities. I look forward to them, too, and go whenever I'm able. After the content, there is always an opportunity for questions to the student presenters. Several things are taken for granted: the student presenters control the questions, taking turns among themselves to call on the audience volunteers; students call each other and the guides by name, clearly familiar with children and adults in all of the other classes and age groups; students speak loudly enough to be heard in the large room by all of the large audience; and audience members are either actively attentive or quietly tuned out rather than distracting or disruptive. Eventually, a boy is called on to ask his question. He stands among his classmates and gathers his thoughts. The room is quiet. Seconds pass. He's thinking, and struggling to express himself. A minute. Quiet. A palpable energy seems to flow in support of the child's efforts. He hesitates. All of the students and teachers here know him, and have experienced his idiosyncrasies and challenges. They wait patiently, respecting his contribution. Even when the boy pauses to request assistance from his full-time classroom aide, the kids don't snicker and fidget. They just wait quietly. With her help, he asks his question, to which the presenters respond matter-of-factly, with confidence. The assembly proceeds; the presentation concludes. Students lead

a few rounds of yoga breathing and the classes depart. It's no big deal, just another morning at Ridge and Valley Charter School.

## Chapter Two: Charter Schools, U.S. and New Jersey

Before relating the Ridge and Valley Charter School story, it is necessary to provide some background to charter schools in the United States and in New Jersey. Charter schools are publicly-funded elementary and secondary schools which usually operate outside of traditional geographical school districts and—at least in theory—benefit from expanded autonomy in exchange for increased accountability. In most states, charter school programs are intended to support innovation in public education and to offer families alternatives to their traditional local district public school. In New Jersey, most charter schools appoint rather than elect the volunteer trustees to manage the school, as do other specialized public schools including vocational-technical schools. The independence of the charter school from the local educational structure is intended to offer increased autonomy in exchange for increased accountability (State of New Jersey, *Charter School*).

Minnesota was the first state to pass a charter school law in 1991. City Academy High School in St. Paul, designed to serve at-risk youth, was the first charter school to open in the United States in 1992 (City). Since then, 41 states

and the District of Columbia have enacted charter school legislation and authorized the operation of charter schools (National Charter). According to the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools' December 2011 report, "Back to School Tallies: Estimated Number of Public Charter Schools & Students, 2011-2012", approximately 5,600 public charter schools enroll over 2 million students throughout the U.S., a 7 percent growth in charter schools and 13 percent growth in charter school students from 2010-2011 (National Alliance). In New Jersey, 80 charter schools educated 25,510 students in 2011-12, representing a growth rate from the previous year of 9.6% in schools and 9.3 % in students (National Alliance). Since enrollment at charter schools is voluntary, and, in some cases, highly competitive, the growth in number of schools and students suggest many families appreciate and seek out educational options within the public school system. As documented in the 2010 film, *Waiting for Superman*, charter schools in urban districts have been in particularly high demand (Guggenehim).

Despite some variance among the states, according to researcher Joe Nathan in *Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education,* charter school program goals across the nation generally include these seven:

1) Improve student learning.

2) Encourage the use of different and innovative learning and teaching methods.

3) Increase choice of learning opportunities for pupils.

4) Establish a new form of accountability for public schools.

> 5) Require the measurement of learning and create more effective, innovative measurement/assessment tools.
>
> 6) Make the school the unit for improvement.
>
> 7) Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to own the learning program at the school site. (qtd. in Lubienski, “Information” 201)

Many of these goals are articulated in New Jersey’s charter program.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools reports that, in addition to the new schools and students, about 160 charter schools closed between 2010-11 and 2011-12 (two in New Jersey), demonstrating the accountability required of public charter schools (National Alliance). Since 1992, approximately 1,036 of the 6,700 U.S. charter schools ever opened have closed, a closure rate of 15% overall. These schools were closed by their state authorizers for various reasons, including low enrollment, financial deficiencies, academic underperformance, mismanagement, district-related issues, and facilities problems (Consoletti 23). While a closure rate of 15% is significant, Alison Consoletti, author of the Center for Education Reform’s 2011 report, “The State of Charter Schools: What We Know—and What We Do Not—About Performance and Accountability”, claims “it is still lower than the small business failure rate and dramatically higher than the percentage of conventional or traditional public schools ever closed” (14). Though many states including New Jersey have experienced state takeovers of underperforming traditional district schools, closure is rare. In New Jersey, even school districts that fail to meet the No Child

Left Behind (NCLB) criteria for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for six years are not subject to closure, though they may be subject to various remediation strategies to improve service to their students (State of New Jersey Department of Education, “Title I”).

The increase in charter schools and the rate of closure overall illustrate that independently-operated, accountable, mission-oriented schools offering alternatives in public education are appreciated by a significant number of U.S. families. In New Jersey in 2013, more than a quarter of operating charters, including Ridge and Valley Charter School, are on probation or in pre-probationary status, attesting to increased accountability to the Department of Education performance criteria (Calefati, “N.J. Education Department”).

Some of the inherent challenges to starting a charter school are apparent in the New Jersey Administrative Code. For example, the funding system itself encourages competitive and adversarial relationships with local district schools, and severely limits the potential for facility development by barring use of any public funds apart from operating funds for facility (State of New Jersey, *N.J. Administrative*). As in many states whose property taxes provide support for public education, in New Jersey’s charter program, the funding follows the child. In our state’s system, the funds flow through a specific school in each child’s district of residence and come to the charter school in the form of a monthly check for 90% of that sending district school’s per pupil amount for providing a “thorough and efficient” education. The district of residence retains 10% of the per-student amount for each child for administrative costs and to provide

transportation within the charter school's region of residence or payment in lieu of transportation for districts outside the region of residence.

For example, I live in the township of Hardwick. Our township middle school students attend North Warren Regional Middle School, supported by property taxes of Hardwick, Blairstown, Frelinghuysen, and Knowlton. Every October, the Department of Education confirms enrollment at Ridge and Valley Charter School and supplies payment schedules to the districts of residence of each of the 128 students. Unlike urban charters, whose students generally come from one district, RVCS receives students from more than 26 different school districts, each of which calculates a different per-student cost, with significant disparity among the amounts. Each month, the North Warren Regional Middle School Business Administrator writes a check, which includes the monthly increment of the equivalent of my daughter's annual tuition at NWRMS. There are several drawbacks to this process, the most important being the misperception that charter schools are taking funds that belong to the district school, whether or not that school educates the child. In addition, the funding stream often lags behind enrollment and is subject to year-end catch-up payments. Most challenging of all for RVCS and many other charter schools, no funds *at all*, apart from independently-acquired grants or money from private sources, is available to the charter school until *after* the doors open. No public bonds or funds may be designated for acquisition of a facility by a charter school and all facility expenses including costs for initial set-up, renovation, upgrades, furnishings, and equipment must be covered from the operating budget (New

Jersey Department of Education Office of Charter Schools, “New Jersey Charter School Application”). Under these conditions, creating positive community relations and securing a facility are two of the greatest challenges for charter school founders and were nearly the undoing of Ridge and Valley.

Additionally, the Code establishes that charter schools must obey public school laws and adhere to their specific mission, as described in detail in the comprehensive charter application. It suggests that exceptions to regulations may be granted by the DOE in areas other than assessment, testing, civil rights, special education, and student health and safety regulations. Experience suggests that there are few regulations not related to assessment, testing, civil rights, special education, and student health and safety regulations (State of New Jersey, *N.J. Administrative*), so charter schools in general operate within the same requirements as New Jersey district schools, receive 90% of the per-pupil amount directly from the school in the child’s district of residence, and are subject to increased accountability and possibility of closure.

Among the reasons for resistance to charter schools, notably by the New Jersey Education Association and teachers’ unions across the country, is a belief that charter schools siphon funds from district schools, selectively admit the best students, and limit enrollment of students with special educational needs (Thigpen). In New Jersey, as in many states, school funding follows the child, whether the child changes district by moving to another town or by choosing to attend a charter school. Charter school admission and enrollment are strictly regulated to maintain transparency and equity of access (State of New Jersey,

*N.J. Administrative*), and schools have been held accountable for irregularities in recruitment and admissions. At RVCS, 24% of students have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), compared to neighboring Frelinghuysen Township School's 15%, which suggests that enrollment of students with specifically-identified learning needs has not been curtailed at RVCS.

At the time of the New Jersey legislation, several states had established small charter school programs, and many had found positive results for students and families. The majority of charter schools, nationwide and among New Jersey's applicants, are located in urban areas, and many are established in response to crumbling district schools and crippling social conditions. The New Jersey legislation, however, emphasizes educational innovation and sets few geographical or population conditions for charter schools. Millburn, New Jersey parent Matthew Stewart, member of Millburn Parents Against Charter Schools, shares a common misconception in his criticism of proposed charters in his area: "'I'm in favor of a quality education for everyone . . . In suburban areas like Millburn, there's no evidence that the local school district is not doing its job. So what's the rationale for a charter school?'" (qtd. In Hu 1). In keeping with the original charter legislation, the rationale is educational innovation, articulated in the school's mission and manifested by the school's board of trustees, within the existing context of public education in New Jersey. In a carefully-worded statement, New Jersey Education Association President Barbara Keshishian concurred that innovation is the reason for charter schools: "Charter schools were meant to be laboratories of innovation—not a replacement for all public

schools. If we're really smart, we'll identify excellent schools of all types and replicate their successes wherever we can" (Keshishian). In spirit at least, the law encourages rethinking of almost every aspect of public education, inspiring innovators to envision an ideal school for their population.

The New Jersey Charter School Program Act took effect in 1996 and established the parameters for independently-administered, mission-based public schools. The statute's findings state that charter schools "can assist in promoting comprehensive educational reform" throughout the state by expanding educational choice in environment, pedagogy, and accountability (State of New Jersey, *Charter*). Opportunity for innovation within a school is expanded, balanced by increased internal and external assessment. In 1996, New Jersey committed "to encourage and facilitate the development of charter schools" (State of New Jersey, *Charter*).

The administrative code developed to accompany the legislation, *N. J. Administrative Code, Charter Schools (N.J.A.C. 6A:11),* outlines the charter school application process and establishes the authority of the state Department of Education to authorize and monitor the schools. The Code specifies eligibility and enrollment criteria to ensure equitable admission of students and siblings, and describes the requirements of local districts to provide transportation to charter school students and to serve as conduits for the public funds that constitute the charter school's revenue (State of New Jersey, *N.J. Administrative*). Requirements for charter schools regarding geographical range, financial accountability, and adherence to education law and regulations are also

described. For example, the funding system prohibits use of public funding for charter school facilities; charter schools must buy or lease their space from operating funds. Within these parameters, founders are expected to “make the case” in the application for the excellence and viability of their proposed school in terms of governance, finance, and academics.

## NJ Charter Application, Evaluation, and Renewal Process

In New Jersey, any group may apply for a charter, based on any mission in accordance with the laws of the state. (A religious school could not be approved, for example.) Existing public schools or units within them are eligible to apply for a charter, as are institutions of higher education, groups of teachers or parents, and even for-profit companies. There are charter schools specializing in performing arts, urban leadership, science and technology, language immersion, and college preparation (New Jersey Charter School Association). For the Ridge and Valley Charter School founders, the charter school program offered an opportunity, within the public school context, to explore paradigm-shifting educational models in elementary education and to pursue the values implied by a new cosmology in every aspect of the school. A fundamental challenge is apparent: how relevant are conventional models of assessment applied to unconventional schools? If they are not adequate to assess such schools, what forms of assessment will provide reliable information for all of the school’s constituents?

Ongoing formative and periodic summative assessments are mandated by the NJ Department of Education for charter schools in the form of the application for initial charter approval, required Annual Reports, and periodic charter renewal. Monthly financial reports and approved minutes of all public meetings are submitted to the county superintendent and NJDOE Office of Charter Schools for regular ongoing review, and charters submit all other required school reports, a staggering volume of information transmission marked by redundancy, outdated technology, and duplication.

Revised guidelines for Charter School Renewal were released in the July 2012 Performance Framework, which designates new benchmarks for charter schools. The annual data from the School Report Card constitute a portion of the extensive submissions to the school's authorizer and the public. In addition, schools submit data regarding school admissions, mission-specific academic goals, curriculum, learning environment, parental and community involvement, and school governance and leadership (New Jersey Department of Education Office of Charter Schools, "Annual"). Preparation of the reports and renewal applications requires a significant commitment of time and effort from the staff and the volunteer trustees.

The initial charter application is comprehensive. A founding group must be very organized, prepared, and dedicated to develop a successful charter application. In 2010, six charter school applications were approved from among 36 applicants (*Star-Ledger* Staff, "N.J. Department") and in 2011, a record 23 schools were approved out of 51 applicants (*Star-Ledger* Staff, "N.J. Approves").

Eight new schools from over 40 applications were approved in January 2012 (Calefati), and 13 of 34 applicants are still active for 2014 (Mooney). The 2012 Technical Assistance Training for prospective charter school founders outlines the 18 sections of extremely detailed proposals that constitute the application. The first 100 pages explain the proposed school's mission, vision, and educational philosophy. This part of the application may not be revised throughout the life of the charter school, so it is crucial that it be carefully articulated.

Subsequent sections describe the proposed school's goals and objectives, educational program, student populations, assessment, school climate and culture, and proposed discipline program (Ruck). The application must also explain the intended admissions policy and plans for family, community and consultant involvement. The physical and fiscal development of one specific facility is required in detail, along with the school's plan for recruitment and retention of qualified staff. All founders must be specifically identified with contact information and some must meet certain criteria for residence and role in relation to the proposed sending district(s) (*i.e.*, parents and/or certified teachers from that district).

The plan for governance and ongoing self-evaluation accompanies a comprehensive timetable and detailed budget and cash flow for the period from approval through June 30 at the end of Year One of operation (State of New Jersey Department of Education, "New Jersey Charter"). A recent addition to the financial prerequisites is the maintenance of a separate $75,000 escrow account

“for the purpose of having funds available in the event of a corporate dissolution due to charter surrender or revocation” (Ruck). Clearly, a founding group must anticipate and prepare for any number of eventualities as they develop a school vision and plan.

## Chapter Three: RVCS Founding Philosophy

### Implications of a New Cosmology

In dreaming of a school for a hopeful sustainable future, the Ridge and Valley Charter School founders articulated basic principles grouped around five themes they felt were integral to that vision: mutually-enhancing relationships, outdoor education, and experiential, integrated, and differentiated learning. Wisdom traditions and contemporary research in ecology, education, child development, and human dynamics informed responses to the question: how can humans move into mutually-enhancing human-earth relationships? What does a public elementary school for a new paradigm look like?

It may be helpful to explain why the founding volunteers spent long hours in philosophical conversations and practical hard work to design this "school as unusual." According to many scientists, the human moment is unprecedented: humans must either adjust their behavior to reduce the growing negative impact on the planetary ecosystem or accept the consequences of unsustainable expectations. Mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme explains:

> In 1543 Copernicus announced to a startled Europe that the Earth was not stationary, but was sailing rapidly through space as it spun

> around the Sun. This was difficult news to take in all at once, but over time the Europeans reinvented their entire civilization in light of this strange new fact about the Universe. The fundamental institutions of the medieval world, including the monarchies, the church, the feudal economic system, and the medieval sense of self, melted away as a radically different civilization was constructed. ("What is the New Cosmology?")

Though Swimme may be mistaken in asserting the demise of all of these institutions and belief systems, his analogy continues instructively:

> We live in a similar moment of breakdown and creativity. The cosmological discovery that shatters nearly everything upon which the modern age was built is the discovery that the Universe came into existence 13.7 billion years ago and is so biased toward complexification that life and intelligence are now seen to be a nearly inevitable construction of evolutionary dynamics. Our new challenge is to reinvent our civilization. The major institutions of the modern period, including that of agriculture and religion and education and economics, need to be re-imagined within an intelligent, self-organizing, living Universe, so that instead of degrading the Earth's life systems, humanity might learn to join the enveloping community of living beings in a mutually enhancing manner. This great work will surely draw upon the talents and energies of many millions of humans from every culture of our

> planet and throughout the rest of the 21st century. ("What is the New Cosmology?")

The task, then, was to cultivate the talents and energies of a small number of those millions of humans to reimagine education through an innovative public school in rural New Jersey, designed to inspire the re-imaginers of the future.

Like the people of Copernicus' time, humans in the 21st century are presented with news that requires an adjustment of our fundamental assumptions. Science and technology confirm that our species is not separate from or superior to the natural world, as conceived in powerful old stories. We are, instead, participants in

> the contemporary, scientific story of the origin, nature, and function of the universe from its beginning, through its galactic phase, its supernova events, the shaping of the solar system, Earth, life, human life, and self-reflective consciousness as a single, unbroken series of events. (Berry, *Great* 159)

Ecological literacy refers to the attitudes, knowledge, and skills humans need to thrive in an interconnected, integrated, evolving universe. The founding group envisioned mutually-enhancing relationships and education with the earth as primary teacher, organized around a learner-centered ethic of excellence.

Thomas Berry says "To tell the story of anything, you have to tell the story of Everything" (qtd. In *Awakening).* Our species, relative newcomers to the planet, have explored, experimented, and examined our home with increasingly sophisticated tools, symbolic communication through spoken and written

language arguably the most important. Human curiosity, ingenuity, and perseverance have led to discoveries and information that changed our species' worldview over and over. Technological developments allow new perspectives; humans' view of ourselves, our home, and our origins are continually informed by collective experience. In space, astronauts see the earth as a self-contained, self-organizing system, a blue marble, "perched in perfect equipoise" in the velvet darkness of space (Drew Dellinger, quoted in *Awakening*). Through electron microscopes, scientists view subatomic particles and, more importantly, their actions in the "foaming creativity" of the spaces between them (Swimme, *Powers*).

In 2006, the Cosmic Background Explorer satellite allowed Nobel Prize-winning scientists John C. Mather and George F. Smoot to record the blackbody radiation that offers an "echo" of the Big Bang ("Nobel"). In July 2012, physicists at the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (Cern) in Geneva identified a Higgs boson particle, a key piece to confirming the Standard Model of Physics (Connor). In terms of cosmology, the Higgs boson is an indicator that contemporary scientific theories of the origins of the Universe are accurate. "Theoretical physicists have long postulated that Higgs particles permeate the Universe, creating an invisible energy field that causes other particles of matter to have mass, allowing matter to coalesce into larger objects such as molecules, stars and planets" (Connor). Technology allows us to re-imagine the ancient human cosmologies, which celebrated union, integration, and mystery, while

developing a new story of union, integration, and mystery based on fresh perceptions and a growing body of empirical data.

Origin stories, or cosmologies, have shaped understanding, behavior, and culture among groups of humans from the time of our earliest ancestors. Explanations of the beginning—the purpose, organization, and processes of the universe—influenced the earliest tribes of ancient Africa and shape the complex societies of contemporary North America. Tracing shifts in cosmology over time highlights perceptual changes away from a view of humans integrated within an encompassing natural world (the "Sacred Hoop" of the Lakota Sioux Indians, for example) to a mechanistic, materialistic, hierarchy of separated people and "resources", a natural world in service to the desires of one species.

Cultural historian Berry and mathematical cosmologist Swimme, expanding on the thought of early 20th-century philosopher Teilhard de Chardin among others, describe this change in our story (characterized by the adoption of an anthropocentric bias), as fundamentally false, devastating to the planet, and ultimately self-destructive. Berry and Swimme refer to the currently accepted worldview of evolution to illustrate and support this claim. Twenty-first-century scientists generally agree that the universe as we understand it today originated from an immense burst of energy around 14 billion years ago, through a unified, continuing process of expansion and change (Swimme, *Universe* 14).

Swimme and Berry provide an elegant narration of evolutionary cosmology in the Prologue to *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era–A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*. The

fundamentally integrated, dynamic interrelationships among living and non-living organisms described by this emergent origin story challenge mechanistic and materialistic assumptions about humans and the earth. Evolutionary cosmology presents an ecosystemic model, supported by scientific observation from Copernicus to Einstein to Mather and Smoot.

> Humans discovered that the universe as a whole is not simply a background, not simply an existing place; the universe itself is a developing community of beings. Humans discovered by empirical investigation that they were participants in this fifteen-billion-year sequence of transformations that had eventuated into the complex functioning Earth. . . . not simply as a cosmos, but as a cosmogenesis, a developing community, one with an important role for the human in the midst of the process. (Swimme, *Universe* 14*)*

The authors assert humans are experiencing a paradigm shift at the end of the geologic era. Ecological realities suggest that a future "Technozoic" era of continued exploitative human-earth relationships is simply unsustainable. To support thriving planetary ecosystems, a shift to an "Ecozoic" perspective, characterized by mutual enhancement of the entire Earth community, will be required (Swimme, *Universe* 15). Indeed, predictions of the long-term effects of humans' current mercantilistic relationship to the earth suggest a shift soon may be necessary to our species' survival.

In *The Dream of the Earth*, Berry describes consequences of humans' continued adherence to a destructive, anthropocentric, patriarchal worldview,

based on a physically unsustainable cycle of consumption and production. Characterizing four stages of Western European and North American development as patriarchal, Berry shows how the classical empires, the ecclesiastical establishment, the nation-state, and the modern corporation all advance assumptions that constitute dangerous cultural conditioning. All of these institutions obscure perception of humans as one species among many in an interdependent ecosystem, a fundamental truth of human existence and one Berry believes is central to any sustainable future. The author claims that awareness of the assumptions underlying our institutions and conscious efforts to educate ourselves and our children to embrace mutually-enhancing human-earth relationships instead will lead to a global transformation of human culture (Berry, *Dream* 202). This must begin with individuals and institutions.

Recognizing that technological developments have offered humans an unprecedented view of the origin and nature of our universal ecosystem, as well as unparalleled influence over its continued development, Berry, Swimme, and others propose that the challenge of our time is to align human thought and behavior to this radical new view of ourselves and our place in a fundamentally integrated, interdependent life-system. The facts of planetary ecosystem degradation, mass extinction, global climate change, and unsustainable utilization of natural and human resources worldwide suggest a radical response to this challenge is timely and necessary. Study after study demonstrates that humans cannot continue current relationships with our natural world and survive. Rather than cause for despair, Berry and other proponents of ecological literacy

view this pressing need as a unique opportunity for conscious, positive, evolution of the human species, for a paradigm shift that features *homo sapiens* as members of a multi-faceted, thriving life community (Berry, *Dream* 222). Berry claims the mission of our time is nothing less than to "reinvent the human" (Berry, *Great Work* 168). A public elementary school providing fundamental education to the citizens of the future must certainly grapple with that.

All New Jersey charter schools are tasked with improving pupil learning, expanding educational choice for New Jersey families, and supporting rigorous accountability, by measuring and documenting academic and non-academic outcomes. In addition, the Ridge and Valley Charter School's governance is based on non-hierarchical, collaborative relationships characterized by shared leadership and responsibility in the form of PeerSpirit circle methodology, practiced throughout the school, from the board of trustees to individual groups of students and guides. This in itself is a significant contrast to the hierarchical bureaucracy that characterizes public education in New Jersey and Ridge and Valley Charter School is the first public elementary school to attempt it. All aspects of operations and decision-making are subject to review based on the principles outlined in the school's mission. From organization of curriculum scope and sequence to coordination of school policies encouraging healthful food and drink, practices are developed in response to the question, "What does education for a hopeful sustainable future entail?" The fact that the school charter was approved and renewed demonstrates remarkable success in integrating this vision into the existing New Jersey public school structure.

In dreaming of a school for a new paradigm, the founders articulated foundational principles grouped around nine themes. They relied on wisdom traditions and contemporary research in ecology, education, child development, and human dynamics to guide our response to the questions: how can humans move into mutually-enhancing human-earth relationships? What does a public elementary school to facilitate it look like?

## Foundational Principles

This radical shift in worldview led to the first group of foundational principles:

> *Foundational Principle: Earth Literacy Focus*
>
> All subjects will be experienced with Earth Literacy as the primary focus.
>
> Students will expect to spend 25% of their learning time outdoors.
>
> Students will be encouraged to use sustainable lifestyle practices at school and at home. (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Foundational")

To move into a new paradigm, we must examine the concept of fundamental interconnection and its implications.

Earth Literacy or ecological literacy is a field of study concerned with "the unity and relationships binding Earth and the totality of life under the conditions out of which Earth has emerged within a single, unfolding Universe" (Genesis Farm); ecological literacy encourages awareness of and learning from the

natural systems that foster life on earth. With the earth as teacher, we see the elementary principles of differentiation, subjectivity, and communion in all ecological systems (Edwards). From these organizational concepts, we can imagine human communities likewise based on integration, sustainability, and complexity, following the pattern of the natural world (Orr 87). Earth literacy education, therefore, includes not only learning and instruction in attitudes, skills, and knowledge in respect to our planet, but also the development of a perspective or worldview that tells the story of the universe, Earth, life, and the human species centering on the Earth and life as the focus, not the human species (Paynter).

For students to engage with the earth community, experience the diversity of species, witness the interactions of ecosystems, they need to be there. Outside. Wonder and awe, leading to interest, understanding, and love, arises from direct connection of children to the natural world (Orr iv).

Natural integration provides the model for integrated study and the next group of foundational principles:

> *Foundational Principle: Experiential Learning, Experiential Education*
>
> Subjects will be experienced, not taught, and will not be segmented as separate unrelated areas of study.
>
> Teaching methods will be modeled primarily on experiential education methods.

> Experiential education values the interests, attractions, and natural abilities of the students as the basis for their learning.
>
> Students will develop problem solving skills through their participation in community real-world projects individually and with classroom groups.
>
> Teacher directed learning will encompass no more than 25% of the school day.
>
> Students will ask more questions than teachers. (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Foundational”)

Integrated curriculum is a way of teaching and learning that diverges from the usual division of knowledge into separate subjects and focuses on topics of interest and value to the teachers and students concerned, whether or not they appear in a required course of study. An integrated curriculum, like an interdisciplinary curriculum, helps students see connections (Paynter). Interdisciplinary studies organize inquiry around topics and themes, exploring them from the perspectives of two or more recognized areas of study. For example, the topic of native people of New Jersey might incorporate stories and myths (language arts), exploration of the remains of native peoples’ dwellings (social studies), and investigation into agricultural practices and production (science, math) to consider the theme or essential question of “How do people fit into their ecosystem?” Effective interdisciplinary studies incorporate a topic that lends itself to study from several points of view, one or more themes (or essential questions) to explore, and activities intended to further students' understanding

by establishing relationships among knowledge from more than one discipline or school subject (Paynter).

Experiential learning occurs when students are placed in a situation where they think and interact, learn in and from a real-world environment; experiential education is “a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills and clarify values” (Association for Experiential Education). While traditional teaching and learning is often teacher-directed, content-driven, text-oriented and classroom-based, experiential learning involves active participation of the student in planning, developing, and executing learning activities, often outside the classroom, simulating or incorporating real-world situations. “The educator and learner may experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking and uncertainty, because the outcomes of experience cannot totally be predicted” (Education Commission). Experiential learning—posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning—is what most people do all the time; it follows that formal schooling can support children’s natural abilities and inclinations.

Learner-centered instruction requires being open to students’ curiosity, even when it diverges from the plan. Second-grade teacher Erian Leishman recognized the importance of learner interest through a lab experiment related to capillary systems in plants. Having dismissed a student’s question she thought silly (“Will plants drink *green* water?”), she recalled

> It is frightening how much power I have in the classroom. . . . I had never consciously thought about my criteria for determining whose questions get validated in my classroom and whose will be deemed unworthy. . . . which ones get pursued and which ones get a slight nod of the head, indulgent smile, no response, or even a reprimand. . . . How many Daniels had I dismissed and discouraged from asking questions in my classroom? (Beck 57)

Learner-centered, self-directed study cultivates the habits of mind that lead to lifelong learning.

A group of foundational principles address the implications of learner-centered education:

> *Foundational Principle: Learning will be personalized to meet the needs of individuals.*
>
> Teachers will identify learning styles and specific interests of their students and guide learning accordingly.
>
> Students will participate with teachers in designing and adapting academic activities. This reflects their personal goals and develops their multifaceted talents. (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Foundational")

Extensively researched by Howard Gardner of Harvard University, among others, learning styles are influenced by individual tendencies ("intelligences" in Gardner's terminology) including cognitive style, preference for particular senses, and inclination to work independently or with others (Gardner 12). To maximize

opportunities for learning, instruction is differentiated to accommodate students' natural predilections, leading to a highly individualized program of study.

Balancing the needs of individuals and the expectations of various constituencies (including the New Jersey Department of Education) is challenging for educational institutions, particularly when the institution departs from convention. Ridge and Valley Charter School, in accordance with commitment to differentiation of instruction and learner-centered education, offers this program for literacy:

> *Foundational principle: A balanced literacy approach will be implemented and will include whole language and phonics based on student readiness and ability.*
>
> Students will be encouraged to read every night.
>
> Grammar will be integrated into the process of writing, not taught as a separate subject. (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Foundational")

Balanced literacy is a path to reading and writing instruction that utilizes a range of methods and incorporates planned outcomes assessments from the initial design. Specific instruction and practice of skills complements reading of authentic texts, which can accommodate the pace and skill levels of individual learners more flexibly than a standard grade-level reading textbook (Paynter). Two facets of balanced literacy, whole language and phonics, respectively address students' focus on meaning and creativity in written expression and the practical connection of letters to sounds. Though it may appear paradoxical, even

inventive spelling is an exercise in phonics, encouraging students to spell words as they hear them in conjunction with learning conventional spelling (Adams 10). The Readers and Writer Workshop model designed in conjunction with Columbia University Teachers College by literacy experts Lucy Calkins and Nancie Atwell and employed at RVCS since 2008 promotes these values of independence and self-direction.

In addition to reading, writing, and arithmetic, behavior is a primary concern for elementary school educators and parents. Principles regarding behavior seek to embody the school's commitment to respect for children and goal of guiding them toward self-sufficiency and a new model of peaceful human interaction.

> *Foundational principle: A positive discipline approach will be used.* Students will learn conflict resolution techniques as part of a formal conflict resolution program. All discipline problems that are not in the category of causing physical harm or property damage will be handled through the mediation process.
>
> Students will participate in establishing rules of their classroom. (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Foundational")

Adults generally feel comfortable and secure when expectations for behavior are clear, when they have participated in creating the expectations, and have explicitly assented to the guidelines and any consequences if the guidelines are not followed. Children are no different, though many conventional discipline models seem to suggest they are, simply by virtue of their maturity. Conflict

resolution requires all people, adults and children alike, to take responsibility for their actions and for their communication about their behavior. Seeking a mutually-satisfying result and emphasizing compassion, people using conflict resolution techniques commit to listening carefully and well, speaking intentionally, and focusing on opportunities to meet each participant's needs. Practice of conflict resolution can develop communication skills and habits of mind that reduce occasions of conflict (Center for Non-violent Communication).

The tenets of conflict resolution suggest that everyone's needs are valuable and the potential for compassionate giving and receiving exists in any combination of people. Few adults associate only with their age-peer group; the ability to function in different roles is both practical and satisfying.

> *Foundational principle: Learning will be collaborative in flexible groups.*
>
> Children will work with younger and older schoolmates in multiple and flexible group arrangements. This develops personal skills appropriate to the various roles of team member, mentor, guide, teacher, and learner.
>
> Students will have opportunities to spend a large portion of their day working collaboratively with other students. (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Foundational")

Creative collaboration is undoubtedly the way of the universe, combining energies synergistically to achieve results. Helping children practice various roles

supports development of a range of interpersonal skills, including, perhaps most importantly, self-reflection.

Continuous formative assessment also encourages self-reflection. Ridge and Valley Charter School views assessment as an integral part of the learning process rather than as a final step to completion.

> *Foundational principle: Authentic assessment*
>
> Assessment will be ongoing through exhibitions, portfolios, and project-based rubrics, rather than conventional grades.
>
> Ongoing assessment will include evaluation and self-evaluation based on criteria and standards developed collaboratively by teachers and students. (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Foundational")

Formative assessment is detailed and specific. It can contribute to improvement by inviting the learner to participate in metacognitive self-reflection to complement the evaluation of the teacher or mentor. Authentic assessment strives to measure realistically the knowledge and skills needed for success in adult life by using opportunities for real or approximately real performance.

> Most school tests are necessarily contrived. Writing a letter to an imaginary company only to demonstrate to the teacher that you know how is different from writing a letter to a real person or company in order to achieve a real purpose. . . . One way to make an assessment more authentic is to have students choose the

particular task they will use to demonstrate what they have learned. (Paynter)

When the work is real and personal, students care.

Exhibitions and portfolios invite students to make their work accessible to others and can also motivate performance. Rubrics clarify shared expectations by setting out in written form the components of an assessment and describing indicators of achievement at various levels. Many educators believe authentic assessment and performance assessment are more accurate and relevant than conventional testing to discern and develop student learning (Multimedia). It is important for students to be competent with many forms of assessment, including conventional standardized testing.

All public schools in New Jersey are accountable to the Common Core State Standards, the common expectations for student achievement throughout the thirteen years of public education. Progress toward meeting these expectations is measured annually through the statewide New Jersey Assessment Of Knowledge And Skills (NJ-ASK) testing program, currently required in third to eighth grades and proposed to be expanded to include every grade (Office of State Assessments). The annual tests will be replaced by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test in 2015 to more closely reflect the Common Core State Standards.

*Foundational principle: Common Core State Standards*

> Students will receive ongoing preparation to succeed on all state-mandated standardized tests reflecting mastery of the Common Core State Standards. (Ridge and Valley, “Foundational”)

The Common Core State Standards adopted by the State Board of Education describe standards and indicators for what students should know and be able to do in nine content areas upon completion of a thirteen year public education. School-wide performance on the NJ-ASK standardized tests is included in measurements of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), as required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (State of New Jersey). AYP indicators are a significant factor in approval for renewal of an existing charter school’s charter.

Just as the school relies on many sources of inspiration and guidance, conventional and unconventional, so, too, students need to draw from a range of influences.

> *Foundational Principle: Community*
>
> Students will have access to all of the teachers on the staff as resources and advisors. (Ridge and Valley, “Foundational”)

Approximating the “*Casa dei Bambini*” or “Children’s Home” model of Maria Montessori, the school community resembles a family, with myriad and dynamic interrelationships among the members (Seldin 12). To develop and maintain connections with teachers of various grades and specialties helps children understand how a unified team is composed of unique individuals and how each person contributes distinctively to the whole.

## Ecological Literacy

Ecological literacy respects the natural world as the primary teacher and the scientific story of the universe as the context of curriculum. The early years of the 13.7 billion year origin story provide a framework to orient knowledge in astronomy, physics, chemistry, meteorology, and geology. Examination of the development of planets leads to understanding in paleontology, biology, and ecology, social sciences, politics, and theology. Awareness of the scientific origin story of the universe helps children understand their own place in time and in the world. This knowledge and connection will have a powerful effect on children, as the visionary Maria Montessori explains.

> If the idea of the universe is presented to children in the right way, it will do more for them than just arouse their interest, for it will create in them admiration, wonder, and a deep sense of belonging. It is not enough for the teacher to restrict herself to loving and understanding the child, she must first love and understand the universe. (Montessori, qtd. in Genesis Farm, "Why").

What better goal for primary education than to develop in children "admiration, wonder, and a deep sense of belonging" for their home?

The term "nature-deficit disorder" was first used by Richard Louv in his 2005 *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Louv explains that children have been separated from unstructured outdoor exploration and play to disastrous effect. Increased commitment to scheduled activities, increased time spent with electronic and indoor activities, ignorance of

natural science, fear of the unknown, and lack of access to natural spaces has left children disconnected to the natural world and uncomfortable or fearful in wild places (139). Though studies show that symptoms of Attention-Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are reduced when children engage in outdoor activities or interact with the natural world, most schools perpetuate an unhealthy alienation from nature by limiting or eliminating outdoor play time, reducing emphasis on the study of natural science, and devaluing time spent outside (Louv 107).

In *Childhood and Nature: Design Principles for Educators*, educator David Sobel refers to Bill Bigelow's claims that formal schooling taught him contempt for nature in order to argue for the importance of the relationship between schools and the natural world (8). "Place-based" education, which Sobel advocates, can lead to children replacing contempt for nature to love for the earth, and a sense of commitment and belonging. Experiencing and studying the local bio-region leads to schools "getting smarter and making the community better and protecting nature" (Sobel, *Childhood* 144). Ecological literacy asserts that, more primary even than "protecting" nature, is respecting nature and respecting humans' full integration in the complex natural web.

Citing numerous studies of environmental, place-based outdoor education programs in elementary schools, Sobel observed improvements in reading and math scores, performance in social studies and science, discipline, and expressions of stewardship for the natural world (Sobel, *Place-Based Education* 28). Research from the Outdoors in All Weather preschool program in Denmark

and Sweden also indicates a significant reduction in childhood illness and school absenteeism when children spend more time outside (Sobel, *Place-Based Education* 35).

Ridge and Valley Charter School students and their families expect at least 25% of the learning time to be outdoors, in all seasons, in all weather. For the youngest children, this includes bundling up in snowsuits, boots, and mittens for daily Wonder Walks around the school grounds. Children of seven and eight learn to identify the species of plants and animals on the campus. Ten-year-olds make campfires to roast potatoes cultivated in the school gardens and study the historical practices of native American tribes local to the area. The oldest children help organize the annual Earth Olympics, a daylong outdoor festival offering obstacle-course-like team activities in survival skills, shelter-building, wild plant identification, outdoor cooking, and stream biology (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 15 May 2009”).

The teachers, referred to as guides, rely on models including the Tom Brown, Jr., Tracker School, Outward Bound, and Expeditionary Learning Schools to support children’s immersion in the natural world and cultivate their feeling of being at home there. Students and graduates treasure their experiences of extended camping, canoeing, rafting and kayaking trips, hikes, field studies, and outdoor skill- and team-building with their guides and peers in addition to the daily outdoor activities on campus. Many express pride that they were able not only to survive, but to enjoy extended experiences outside, feeling unexpectedly at home in the wild. A sense of responsibility and stewardship is cultivated

through the experience Montessori described as “admiration, wonder, and a deep sense of belonging” for the natural world. Recognizing belonging to an amazing interconnected universal ecosystem by being at home in familiar and beloved wild places can motivate humans to consider the conditions for those places’ continued vitality and sustainability.

## Integrated, Experiential Education

Considering Earth as primary teacher also highlights the value of integrated, experiential pedagogy. The Association for Experiential Education, a long-time leader in the field, describes the characteristics and importance of experiential education: “a philosophy which engages learners and their guides in direct personal action accompanied by focused reflection on the knowledge, skills, and values relevant to the action” (Association). Principles of EE include the expectation of active learner engagement. Learners demonstrate initiative, participation, and responsibility in designing, reviewing, analyzing, and synthesizing learning experiences. The Association argues that this relationship-based methodology leads to enhanced learning by engaging the whole person, validating the authenticity of the learning experience, and leading to higher understanding and retention (Association).

An important aspect of experiential education relevant to RVCS is the role of the educator or guide. The experiential educator designs experiences, sets parameters for safety and support, poses questions or challenges to the learners, and facilitates (rather than directs) student learning. The role requires reflective,

self-aware professionals who can be open to unexpected or undetermined outcomes, trusting the learners and the learning process. The Association conducts extensive research on experiential education through their Council on Research and Evaluation and the Symposium on Experiential Education and Research (Association), and documents many benefits for all kinds of learners.

The Ridge and Valley Charter School guides participate in the Alliance of New Jersey Environmental Education (ANJEE) and have often been invited to present their RVCS experiences to colleagues at the Association's conferences. Guides often share anecdotes about how an activity was transformed by unexpected responses from students and how their own openness to various outcomes allowed a rich learning experience to evolve. Popular team-building and "challenge-by-choice" activities such as outdoor team obstacles, climbing walls, and low and high ropes courses draw on experiential methods and are regular parts of the students' field studies, building group skills in communication and cooperation. Outdoor expeditions including extended hikes, canoe and kayaking excursions, winter sports, and multi-night group camping trips provide less structured opportunities to learn experientially. The reflections recorded by students during these trips attest to the academic and interpersonal skills they develop in this pedagogy.

The Earth ecosystem consistently models differentiation. Every habitat has shaped the species there with unique adaptations. Even within small genetic groups, individuals show a range of differentiated characteristics. It is increasingly acknowledged in public schools that learners differ widely and

benefit from a range of approaches, as the proliferation of special education and Gifted and Talented programs, accommodations, and services attest. Brain research confirms that multiple instructional strategies provide the greatest opportunities for all learners. The most effective teachers have an expanded repertoire of best practices and pedagogy for differentiation to customize learning (Gregory 133).

Natural opportunities for differentiation arise in experiential education; no role is prescribed for each learner and the outcome is not predetermined. At RVCS, student-designed Independent Study provides further possibilities for students to work alone or with others (peers, mentors, guides) on a project of their choice. Weekly blocks of time are set aside for independent work and students have access to guides and resources throughout the school to articulate and pursue their independent project goals (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Charter Renewal Application* 12). Students in their final year create a Graduation Project that focuses on service to the community. These have included property repair, maintenance, and landscaping, artwork and creative performance, community outreach, and volunteer service. Multi-age grouping at RVCS also supports differentiation by asking children to take various roles as teacher, learner, and peer. Commitment to integrated special education rather than "pull-out" or Resource Room segregated classes for students with distinctive learning needs leads to a range of strategies applied by the guides, from which all students benefit.

In teaching teams, guides certified in special education are able to share their expertise with their colleagues in the actual educational setting, leading to expansion of all the guides' skills. Maintaining an in-house Child Study Team rather than contracting with educational service providers for evaluations and Individual Educational Plans assures consistency and coherence in meeting children's learning needs in the least-restrictive environment (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 23 September 2010"). Constructivist principles and Positive Discipline practices help students develop internal motivation for appropriate behavior and self-regulation (McVittie).

## Sustainability

The term "sustainability" is variously defined, from "relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged" ("Sustainability") to "meeting the needs of the present while enhancing the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (Unity). Both of these definitions suggest an "old story" perspective, implying the primacy of human needs over that of other species and characterizing the non-human as "resources." A "new story" or new cosmology point of view expands the notion of sustainability to include responsibility for supporting and perpetuating the well-being of the entire ecosystem, of developing mutually-enhancing relationships not only with other humans, but with other species and the non-living parts of the system as well. This is clearly contained within the scope of ecological literacy.

Unity Charter School in Morristown, New Jersey, RVCS' sister school, has designated sustainability as the cornerstone of their mission and delineates six aspects of the concept. Within a vision of a vital planet where all living things persist in perpetuity, the Unity mission defines ecological sustainability as mineral, plant, and animal life cared for "without resource depletion or pollution buildup" and sustainability with regard to livelihood leading to individuals in present and future generations having "a means to provide for themselves and contribute without the degradation of human lives through poverty, malnutrition, and debt" (Unity).

According to Unity, sustainability for humanity requires "appreciation of diversity and respect for individual spiritual expression and human and civil rights" and consciously-reduced consumption which considers "not only the needs and desires of the consumer, but the future hidden costs to our earth, our societies, and future generations" (Unity). Personal and educational sustainability require learning systems that make principles of sustainability accessible to everyone and encourage individuals to practice them to their highest understanding (Unity).

More and more, institutions take sustainability into account in their decision-making, particularly regarding "green" initiatives in buildings, energy, and equipment. Many schools and businesses seek environmentally-friendly features in design and renovation of facilities, recycle paper and electronic goods, and reduce their energy use by temperature control and turning off lights and machines when not in use. Sustainability at both the micro- and

macrocosmic levels has been a factor in decisions at Ridge and Valley Charter School since its inception, from the selection of recycled modular buildings to the Water Only at School policy, which establishes the expectation that students and staff will rely on water rather than juice, soda, or sweetened sports drinks for healthful hydration while at school (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Policy*).

Guided by the work of leading organizations defining and promoting sustainability, including the State Education and the Environment Roundtable and the Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education, Ridge and Valley Charter School founders and trustees promote sustainability throughout the school. In relation to facility, for example, the selection of used modular classroom units contributed to the school's financial sustainability with their lower cost, and reduced consumption of natural materials by filling the school's need with already existing buildings. Accepting donated and buying used office and classroom furniture, equipment, books, and instructional materials reduces costs for Ridge and Valley and gives new use to quality items no longer needed by the previous owners. Installation of solar panels on the school property was an early initiative to reduce consumption of coal-fueled electricity, promote clean locally-produced energy use in the community, and lead to eventual energy self-sufficiency. With the support of Rutgers Cooperative Extension and the local township engineer, a rain garden for storm-water management was installed at the school in 2012 to improve drainage, reduce Storm water discharge into area streams, and contribute to onsite sustainability education.

One of the earliest policies Ridge and Valley Charter School adopted also related to consumption and sustainability: the Non-Commercial School policy, which prohibits marketing to students in school. Many commercial enterprises offer donations and other incentives to get their products into schools, from math materials that feature counting Cheerios or M & Ms to special TV programs and websites that feature advertising alongside educational content. The policy includes specific guidelines about products, logos, endorsements, and access to students and encourages responsible, thoughtful consumption and attention to the impact of consumer choices. This is quite contrary to the messages students encounter in the media and in their daily lives in society outside of school (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Policy*). Another early policy requires prioritizing local sourcing of materials and supplies. The policy contributes to sustainability in the community and the school both economically and philosophically. Patronizing local businesses provides economic support to the community; choosing to spend locally promotes knowledge of and goodwill toward the school, both important aspects of long-term sustainability (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Policy*).

Principles of sustainability have a great impact on choices related to food. Contemporary mono-crop conventional agriculture and the international food processing and distribution system are contrary to sustainable principles in almost every way. Promotion of local agriculture, seasonal eating, and smaller-scale farming is essential to building sustainable communities. Ridge and Valley Charter School is fortunate to have the Community Supported Garden at

Genesis Farm as a neighbor and model. Students in all grades experience the cultivation and consumption of local, seasonal vegetables produced by the Community Supported Garden within the alternative economic model of community-supported agriculture (CSA), in which consumers share risk and benefit with local farmers (Community).

In addition, local farmers and gardeners join experienced stewards on the school staff to help students establish and maintain the school's extensive vegetable, flower, and herb gardens, fruit trees and bushes, orchard, root cellars, and greenhouse. Classes regularly learn about the economic implications of local agriculture while enjoying salad greens they planted themselves. A paradigm shift in relation to food is a challenge to some families, and Ridge and Valley Charter School acknowledges that. Policies encouraging healthy food and drink explain their reasoning in terms of sustainable energy: food is fuel to sustain the children's energy throughout an active day, and water is the best source of regular hydration. Because school activities require consistent student energy and attention, healthful whole foods and water are expected to be consumed at school (Ridge and Valley Charter School, Policy). Families' choices at home are up to them.

Students attend to sustainability in their educational program as well, for example, in an ongoing interdisciplinary Key Learning Experience (KLE) focusing on Nourishing: Sustenance and Fulfillment (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 17). Students in this KLE may participate in community-based service learning projects, which are meant to develop relationships with local

individuals and organizations and promote volunteerism and responsibility. Such projects include collections of food for local pantries, or supplies for shelters for humans or animals in need.

Students have participated in recycling drives, clean-up projects, and fund- and consciousness-raising events in conjunction with local groups, raising awareness of sustainable practices to support the community (McKenzie-Mohr 74). One culminating annual event, the RVCS Earth Olympics, focuses on sustainability in several areas. Students move through stations exploring conservation and use of water, alternative energy sources, subsistence shelter-building, outdoor survival skills, recycling, and re-purposing. Multi-aged teams cooperate to make a fire with a bow-drill, bake bread in a solar oven, test the water quality of the local stream, race to build a waterproof debris hut, identify edible plants, and inventory local species (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Program"). The events of the Earth Olympics invariably lead students to reflect on the many conveniences and consumption habits modern Americans take for granted, the importance of sustainability in interpersonal relationships, and the impact of individual choices on sustainability.

In relation to the adults of the school, sustainability is often an argument in favor of change. Throughout the history of the school, fiscal resources have had to be allocated carefully to meet the operating and capital expenses. Due to these restraints, staff and faculty salaries are not always comparable to local districts in similar positions, and, initially, part-time and hourly staff members were not eligible for employer-provided insurance. Recognizing that health

insurance coverage is an important factor in a sustainable livelihood for the staff, the trustees prioritized providing coverage for everyone over salary increases or expansion of staff.

After a few years of careful budgeting and monitoring of expenses, Ridge and Valley was able to offer health and dental insurance for all employees (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 15 March 2007”). Employees have also included sustainability as a factor in proposals regarding the school calendar, on-site duties, and length of the school day and year; in circle-based conversations, the impact on sustainability with regard to various individuals, groups, the land, and the institution of the school itself are carefully considered.

## Curriculum Framework

A context of ecological literacy and integrated cosmology has practical and pedagogical implications. For the founders, the philosophy and methods of experiential education and the principles and practices of differentiation were central to ecologically-literate education. The school’s original *Curriculum Framework* presents an elegant structure of how these ideas are manifested in the elementary school educational program.

The “Introduction and Premise” of the *Ridge and Valley Charter School Curriculum Framework* explains that education for a hopeful sustainable future requires “a profound shift in [human] understanding of and relationship with the earth, universe, and each other . . . changing the lens, angle, or perspective from which we view the world and our stories of it” (5). The resource states the

school's goal of cultivating in students the practical skills and knowledge necessary for confident, articulate, self-regulating, self-disciplined, and self-motivated individuals who will be "rich, important, and effective agents for and models of sustainable living and change" (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum Framework* 5).

In support of this goal, the *Framework* articulates key aspects of the RVCS learning culture: multi-age structure and curriculum loops, circle practice, experiential, project- and place-based, interdisciplinary learning, independent study, Reading and Writing Workshops, and inquiry-based mathematics (7). Each of these components, its contribution to the students' experience, and the way it supports the school's vision is described. Multi-age structure and curriculum loops, for example, recognize that individuals, even children of the same age, develop uniquely. While two six-year-olds may be equally competent physically or socially, they are unlikely to be as well-matched in emotional or academic skills. The *Framework* explains that the two- to three-year curriculum loops group students in a range of ages and allow for more realistic experiences of cooperation, mentoring, and collaboration.

Outside of formal education, there are relatively few circumstances in which humans interact primarily only with members of the same age group. At Ridge and Valley Charter School, multi-age grouping occurs both within the "home" teams, which have a three- to four-year age span and across a wider range of ages through interaction with students on other teams. It is notable that RVCS graduates uniformly mentioned the opportunity to work with students of

various ages as important, enjoyable, and rewarding aspects of their experience at the school. Circle process, the non-hierarchical governance model employed throughout Ridge and Valley, also enhances interaction among those of different ages, be they younger and older children or children and adults. The *Framework* refers to "the personal responsibility and mutual respect necessary to work in a circle of peers: to ask for what we need and offer what we can, in support of the explicit shared intention of the group"(6).

The Ridge and Valley Charter School learning culture relies on the pedagogical perspectives of experiential, project- and place-based interdisciplinary learning, learner-driven independent study, and student-centered differentiated instruction in language arts and math. Focusing on real-world issues and the learning that takes place outside the classroom, experiential, project- and place-based, interdisciplinary learning "defines the teacher's role as a facilitator of learning, values the process of learning over the behavioral outcomes, and is based on the premise that learning is a continuous, integrated process, with experience at its foundation" (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 7). Independent study projects designed by the students exemplify this philosophy of realistic, lifelong, self-motivated learning by encouraging children to identify a personal interest and create a means to explore it. Students work with guides and other students and adults to define goals, plan and follow through on activities, find resources, and document and share their process, achievements, and reflections. Depending on the age of the students, projects have included publication of original field guides to the school flora and fauna,

student-created poetry, drama, and music, and community outreach in conjunction with local libraries, food pantries, and women's shelters.

The school-wide integrated, experiential philosophy means that student effort in language arts or math, for example, can be connected to pursuit of self-directed independent project goals, enhancing motivation and interest. Because students have choices in their language arts reading materials and self-paced math studies, teachers can guide them to appropriate books and concepts related to ongoing project work (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 7). Using language arts skills of articulating and communicating perceptions and understandings of the world and math skills of research and reasoning, students recognize how fields of study intersect and influence each other. The myriad interdisciplinary connections apparent in most modern professional settings are familiar to the children from an early age; they become adept at working in different teams and groups, practicing skills that will serve them throughout their careers and lives.

The most elegant aspects of the *Curriculum Framework* are the design of the yearly integrating lenses and the structure of the ongoing Key Learning Experiences. To organize each year's study, a lens representing a biological process and/or relationship focuses a group's work for that year. Each team cycles through two or three lenses over the course of the year; students experience all of that team's lenses before moving on to the next group. This structure allows students to remain on an age-based team for more than one year without repeating material, joining in the loop at any point and cycling

through (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 9). The age-based teams have been designated with celestial labels and the lenses assigned carefully with attention to the developmental needs of that general age group. The youngest students, for example, roughly from ages four to seven, belong to the Stardust Team and explore their studies through the lenses of Allurement and Niche. A central concept of ecological literacy is loving connection between humans and the natural world, generated through association and attachment. Children experience this naturally, often unable to perceive a distinct separation between themselves and the earth, and ready to encounter the world through their senses, with joy and fascination.

Encouraging this basic binding energy, present in the universe in human friendship, compassion, and love as well as in natural forces such as gravity and electromagnetic attraction, the Allurement lens celebrates the sense of wonder, awe, and connection present at the foundation of our lives as participants in an interconnected universal web (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 11). The lens of Niche highlights individuals' unique places in that web and how one affects another.

> Through this lens, students will explore family, community, anatomical, ecological, solar, language, and other systems. They will discover connections across systems such as how letters make words, sounds make music and language, organs make up their bodies, a wide variety of organisms make up an ecosystem, families make a community, stories and traditions make a culture

> and so on. By drawing awareness to the universal relationships and dynamics within the multitude of overlapping systems that are present in the cosmos, students will see themselves as an important strand in the larger unfolding web of the universe. (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 10)

The basic concepts of belonging, loving, and being loved complement the developmental stage of these youngest students as they begin their journey of formal education.

Building on the foundation of the Stardust Team's concentration on Allurement and Niche, the Nova Team (children from around six to nine years old) explore their curricula through the lenses of Rhythm and Symbiosis. Students observe the cycles and repeating patterns of water, life, communities, weather, seasons, music, physiology, geology, solar and lunar phenomena, movement, language, and arithmetic. Their awareness of rhythm equips them to recognize, predict, and analyze patterns apparent throughout the world and to make connections between these fundamental patterns and their effects (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 11). Similarly, a focus on symbiosis reveals the "kinship and the agreements, principles, and natural laws that are the foundation for [the interdependent] relationships" that characterize our existence (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 11).

The lenses enhance the areas of study designated by the New Jersey and national Common Core Curriculum standards for each age group. For example, searching for symbiosis certainly supports the standard "Active Citizenship in the

21st Century," which specifies that "All students will acquire the skills needed to be active, informed citizens who value diversity and promote cultural understanding by working collaboratively to address the challenges that are inherent in living in an interconnected world" (State of New Jersey Department of Education, "Core"). For students of these ages, rhythm and symbiosis reflect innate attractions to movement and sound and to the experience of belonging to a group while acknowledging one's own and others' individuality. In *The Universe Story*, Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry explain "In the very first instant when the primitive particles rushed forth, every one of them was connected to every other one in the entire universe. At no time in the future existence of the universe would they ever arrive at a point of disconnection. . . . Nothing is itself without everything else" (Swimme and Berry 17). Asking nine-year-olds to internalize this interconnection seems a promising step toward a hopeful sustainable future.

The eight- to eleven-year-olds of the Constellation Team employ the lenses of Homeostasis and Abundance to guide their studies, focusing on how the universe and its beings strive for a state of equilibrium within change (homeostasis) and how the universe offers a profusion of energy, matter, complexity, creativity, and diversity to sustain itself and its ongoing evolution (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 13). For this age group in particular, recognition of the continuous, dynamic, universal pursuit of stability and balance within natural and inevitable change can be stimulating and reassuring. Awareness of the complex interactions of the systems of the human

body, the pancreas releasing insulin to regulate blood glucose, for example, enriches understanding of the complex interactions among people leading to political or cultural upheaval, change, and subsequent return to a new balance. Homeostasis helps students find consistency and logic in the sometimes-perplexing behavior of humans and other species.

It is paradoxical that American young people, among the most affluent on earth, tend to feel lack instead of abundance. Popular consumer culture and media constantly bombard them with images of what they don't have—the newest iPhone, the latest fashionable sneakers—and create a false impression of scarcity and need. Recognizing the implications of that paradigm, where, inevitably, some have and many go without, challenges children to consider the effects of human choices and consequences of human beliefs, especially on the ecosystems that sustain us. Looking for abundance instead, students realize that much of what they value—relationships, family, friends, freedom, beauty—is not available for sale or purchase (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 13). It is a paradigm shift from capitalist, consumer culture; a shift the founders believed necessary for hope and sustainability.

The Galaxy Team is comprised of the oldest students in the school, ten- to fourteen-year-olds, approximately sixth- to eighth-graders. Parents of pre-teens and young teenagers may agree that the concepts of Transformation, Reciprocity, and Emergence are very suited to this demographic. Rooted in the unfolding story of the universe, transformation describes the power of change and adaptation. Swimme and Berry explain: "Many inventions of the natural

world arose out of beings meeting the constraints of the universe with creative responses" (138), that is, transformation.

For the young teenager, swimming in physical, social, intellectual, and emotional transformation, awareness of this quality in the world, how even small changes can have significant effect on larger systems, can lead to awareness of individual potential and responsibility. The *Framework* claims "Understanding the proliferation of transformation that has occurred from the beginning of the universe . . . the limitations and opportunities . . . gives students the perspective necessary for responsible, respectful decision-making" (14). As children of this age gain independence, recognition of the impact of individual choices—personal, economic, environmental—is a valuable ability. Study of the classical civilizations of 3500 BCE to 1500 BCE is one mandated content area for this age group. The time period provides numerous compelling examples of transformation; evidence of their impact is apparent in contemporary American culture and institutions. Reciprocity, another lens, is also important to young people transitioning to greater independence. Reciprocity acknowledges the fundamental give and take of natural systems. It is the "social phenomenon that allows for the existence of systems and organizations . . . the interrelationships, commitment and energetic dynamics between the members of any species, be they ecological, political, solar, physiological, cultural, etc." (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 14).

The school's value of mutually-enhancing relationships presents an ideal of reciprocity, in which the give and take is of shared benefit. Looking for

examples in natural and human history helps students recognize the potential for their own relationships, with their own and other species. The lens of Emergence completes the three-year curriculum cycle for the Galaxy Team and asks children to be mindful of how complex systems originate. Seemingly unrelated interactions can culminate in complex adaptive structures in which the whole exceeds the sum of the parts. Self-organizing properties are evident in human systems such Internet communities, political parties, or even flash mobs. Concentration on the powerful property of emergence is "intended to cultivate not only a deep sense of wonder and awe for the intrinsic intelligence of the universe, but also a deep understanding of the impact of humans on the earth and a corollary sense of responsibility for one's choices" (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 15). Spiraling through all of the lenses over the nine years of elementary school, students have been exposed to fundamental properties of the universe, apparent in human and natural systems throughout history. The curriculum lenses try to provide the largest possible context for all aspects of the children's learning: the universe is our home. Its properties shape and support us, providing guidance for our development and evolution.

The Curriculum Lenses provide philosophical grounding for the school's educational program; the Key Learning Experiences (KLE) offer structure for practical curricular choices. To facilitate integrated, interdisciplinary learning, four categories designate areas of study within which various activities incorporate multiple content areas. For example, Relating: Energetics and Community KLE focuses on "the dynamic interplay between time, space, matter

and energy that results in light, sound, movement, expression, communication, and group dynamics" (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 17). In extended sessions in this category, students may explore verbal and non-verbal communication in human and other species, how sound evolved into music and language, or the presence of Greek and Latin roots in English. They may dance, or sing, track animals, create a model community in the classroom.

The KLE offers an integrating idea for wide-ranging studies. Guides design experiences and outcomes incorporating outdoor learning, community interaction, research, writing, oral presentations, social and scientific inquiry and field study in an array of creative forms. The Exploring: Elements and Expeditions KLE might incorporate basic astronomy for the youngest students, for example, while the oldest attempt to recreate tools for celestial navigation; all students experience extended time outdoors in this KLE, from overnight camping on the property accompanied by a parent for the youngest students to several-day backpacking trips on the Appalachian Trail with classmates and guides for the elder. The goal of "immersion in the natural world that is fun and exciting as well as safe and respectful" presents opportunities for all students, no matter their previous outdoor experience, to feel (and be!) safe and comfortable outside (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 18). Sadly, this is relatively rare among American young people, even those growing up in bucolic northwest New Jersey. The impact of this KLE in particular has reached beyond the students to the families, with several examples of novice outdoorspeople being led on their first camping trip by their own RVCS child.

The Designing: Beauty and Function Key Learning Experience embraces fine and applied arts and the principles of sustainable design, i.e., woodcarving, pottery, and natural clay sculpture; watercolor painting; charcoal drawing; fiber arts including use of natural plant dyes, sewing, weaving, and felting; sculptures, shelters, and art installations created from natural materials such as plants, rocks, or snow. Nourishing: Sustenance and Fulfillment explores food and agriculture, and the less-tangible nourishment of happiness and fulfillment. Children in this KLE follow the cultivation cycle of the school gardens, orchard, and greenhouse to grow, prepare, preserve, and enjoy their own seasonal food; for many, this is their introduction to food production and first awareness that tomatoes don't grow at the A & P. The seasonal trimesters follow the agricultural rhythm and are marked by solstice and equinox celebrations that honor the holidays all on our planet share. Attention to the earth's changes over the year connects us to humans throughout history as well as to the cycles of other species and of the planet itself.

The integrating principles of the Key Learning Experiences are continuously utilized to organize learning year over year. All of the students, no matter the age, learning groups, or learning differences, are connected in their concentration on these themes throughout the school, adapted to fit the children's developmental and academic needs (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 15).

## RVCS Chronology

### Early Efforts 1980 – 2000

The Ridge and Valley Charter School story, grounded in the preceding 14 billion years of evolution, begins with a chance donation of a piece of property in northwest New Jersey to the Dominican Sisters of Caldwell. Genesis Farm was founded in 1980 when Miriam MacGillis, O.P. established a learning center for ecological and earth literacy studies in cooperation with members of her community and local lay people. Sister Miriam brought people together from around the world to explore the challenges a new understanding of the universe and its many species brings to dominant cultural patterns, continuing work pioneered by her mentor Thomas Berry (*Genesis*). Genesis Farm became a center for a lively local community interested in ecological issues and committed to social justice. This was expanded philosophically and practically by the establishment of the Community Supported Garden in 1988 (*Community*).

The Community Supported Agriculture model challenges conventional agribusiness, actively focusing on the local level. Who will produce my food? How will they do it? What resources, human and non-human, are required for my sustenance? Why it is important to care about this? With the inception of the Garden, where members commit to a season, accept risk along with the farmers, and visit weekly to pick up their shares of the harvest and enjoy the farm, more and more families with children became connected to Genesis Farm. Inevitably, with local initiatives like the CSG reimagining institutions for a better future, conversations arose about educational options for children.

From time to time, garden members and students of Genesis Farm's earth literacy programs developed educational cooperatives and homeschooling groups to present ecological literacy to children in response to this community need. Some of these were short-lived, hampered by logistics, finances, attendance, or divergence among the group. An annual Universe Story summer day camp at the farm remains among the most popular of these efforts for children. Organized around ecological themes, it is held outdoors and incorporates the experiential educational practices of Project U.S.E. (Urban Suburban Environments) and other adventure education programs (Genesis).

In 1995, New Jersey passed the Charter School Program Act, which provided a new opportunity for local groups to explore educational alternatives. Unity Charter School, an elementary school based on sustainability, opened in Morristown in 1998 (*Unity*). Local activist, parent, and student of earth literacy Lisa Kelly became interested in alternative educational options for her children and considered applying to enroll them in Unity Charter School, an hour's drive from her home in Hardwick. Conversations with Unity's founding trustees and lead teacher Susan Paynter encouraged her to consider developing a similar school in Blairstown. Relying on the Unity Charter School model, Kelly prepared an application in 1999 for Ridge and Valley Unity Charter School (RVUCS), named for the bioregion of the school's location in northwest New Jersey. The application was approved in January 2000, with a proposed opening of September 2001. Community information meetings were held at Genesis Farm and applications were made available to join the school's board of trustees.

Interviews of trustee candidates took place in the spring, leading to an April 2000 initial meeting of nine founding trustees (Hoff B-1), including myself. Topics of that first gathering included the non-hierarchical governance model, exemplified by the decision to select two Co-coordinators rather than a Board President and Vice-President, and the need to develop among the trustees both 1) deeper understanding of the mission and 2) the practical skills required to open a school (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 28 April 2000”).

From the beginning, a commitment to challenging the conventional domination/exploitation paradigm and recognition of the primacy of ecological literacy was apparent among the founders, along with awareness of the challenges these concepts presented. An ambitious program of professional development followed, which led to some founders withdrawing from the effort and some new trustees joining in. Sessions hosted by Genesis Farm introduced the group to experiential education concepts, the Universe Story, and new cosmology; experiential learning activities facilitated by Project U.S.E. promoted team-building and challenge-by-choice for the group.

One interesting problem-solving experience led us to reflect on how gender roles and expectations unconsciously contribute to behavior. When we were presented with a task that required cooperative resolution, the sole male in the group later explained he felt obligated to take charge and direct the group’s response, simply based on his gender conditioning. The women were willing to go along, perhaps due to similar expectations or to the forceful energy that accompanied his plan. When the initial response failed to complete the task,

other group members offered various suggestions, a combination of which was eventually successful. It was a powerful illustration for everyone in the group of how unconscious learning affects interpersonal dynamics, and it was the first of many examples of the benefits of slowing down into conscious, peer-based, group process. Countless times since then, eliciting everyone's input with openness and curiosity while reserving judgment has led the trustee group to creative, better, solutions.

Founding trustees attended information sessions provided by the New Jersey Department of Education, New Jersey School Boards' Association, and New Jersey School Business Administrators Association. The trustees met biweekly and worked in the interim in smaller groups as committees focusing on Curriculum, Facility, Finances, and Communication. The meetings were conducted according to the model of collaboration and communication articulated in Christina Baldwin's *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture* and PeerSpirit principles. Since most trustees served on multiple committees (there were only a small number of volunteers involved), all gained significant practice in the circle process. All saw it work.

Timeline: Early Efforts 1980 – 2000

1980 foundation of Genesis Farm Ecological Learning Center

1988 foundation of Community Supported Garden at Genesis Farm

Homeschooling group initiatives, Universe Story summer camps

1995 New Jersey Charter School Act

1998 Opening of Unity Charter School, Morristown, NJ

1999 Ridge and Valley Unity Charter School application

2000 Ridge and Valley Unity Charter School application approved for 2001 opening. Nine founding trustees, two Co-coordinators, commitment to non-hierarchy. Committees established: Finance, Facility, Communication, Enrollment, Staff Recruitment, Curriculum, *et al.* Facility search begins.

## Learning Curves: 2001 – 2004

In 2001, the trustees continued to meet, study, reflect, and work in committees. Information Nights for Prospective Families were hosted in each district and trustees visited the township committee and board of education meetings of each of the five local sending districts to offer information and answer questions. Reception at these meetings was generally hostile. Dramatic increases in attendance at the township committee meetings discussing RVUCS demonstrated the strong feelings of the community, with over 200 people attending the Knowlton Township meeting in January 2001 and voicing opposition to the proposed charter school (Coppola 6). Lively debate about the school filled the editorial and Op-Ed sections of the local newspapers (Payette 11). Trustees continued to work with the model of mutually-enhancing relationships and were careful to engage the public from that perspective, difficult though it often was.

After investigating more than one hundred potential long- and short-term sites and actively pursuing eight possibilities, it became apparent in spring 2001 that the approved Ridge and Valley Unity Charter School would not identify and secure a facility in time for the September 2001 opening, and the approved charter was surrendered reluctantly by the trustees in May (Wang 39), despite full enrollment of 90 kindergarten to 6th grade students with a waiting list in some age groups. A revised charter application based on the first, eliminating "Unity" from the school's name and diverging in other significant ways from the Morristown model, was submitted in July 2001 and approved in January 2002, with Ridge and Valley Charter School scheduled to open September 2003. Finding, renovating, and updating a suitable K-8 building in rural New Jersey continued to be an extremely difficult hurdle, with neither funding beyond the projected operational budget of revenue from student tuition (which does not begin to flow until the doors have opened) nor an actual existing school to attract supporters, lenders, or donors. It was hoped to find a large building to lease, and looked, for example, at a former A & P grocery store.

Additional trustees Phil Garber and Kathyann Natkie joined the RVCS effort in 2002. The group continued meeting weekly to address practical and philosophical aspects of the work while contributing to committees in between to keep the process moving. There were seven trustees, and each served on more than one committee. The committees were basically working groups of fewer trustees than would constitute a legal quorum. Professional development for trustees and the community was provided under the terms of a $134,000 Federal

charter school start-up grant, very specifically allocated by the grantors to direct its use and not available for staff or facility costs. Training in PeerSpirit circle practice, non-violent communication, differentiation of instruction, and conventional school governance expanded trustees' abilities in these areas. Individual trustees also educated themselves about financial planning, charter school budgeting and accounting, public school policy, and special education law. An ambitious program of monthly community education was offered to local people and parents of prospective students, and seasonal solstice and equinox celebrations were organized for information-sharing and fellowship (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 18 December 2002").

During this time, trustees continued to review and refine the mission statement, as they struggled to articulate their shared vision of an elementary school for a hopeful sustainable future. What could that look like in the New Jersey public charter school context? The trustees determined opening dates and hours, including a weekly early dismissal for students every Wednesday to allow collaboration time for teachers; they facilitated cooperation with five local sending districts regarding the bus transportation the districts are legally required to provide. Policies in support of Non-Commercial Schools and Local Purchasing were among the earliest adopted (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Policy*). The group considered all decisions in light of the potential impact on collaborative, experiential, outdoor education. In 2002, a private non-profit corporation, Ridge and Valley Learning Circles, was established by the founding trustees in support of the school, particularly in relation to financial and facility development (*Ridge*

*and Valley Learning Circles, Inc*.). The first employee, Administrative Coordinator Nanci Dvorsky, a former trustee, was hired in November (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 13 November 2002).

2003 unfolded with the addition of other key staff members and the acquisition of $970,000 of Federal funds for facility from the School Renovation Grant Program, thanks to the lobbying efforts of the NJ Charter Schools Association, which led the legislature to include charter schools among eligible applicants. A petition circulated locally claiming that RVCS was under the auspices of the Catholic Archdiocese of Newark because of Sister Miriam's presence on the board (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 22 January 2003"). Complaints were filed (later dismissed) with the State Ethics Committee against two trustees (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 26 February 2003).

Jean Edwards joined the group in a consulting role, preparatory to taking the position of Academic Coordinator, and Charles Knopf joined the staff as the part-time certified School Business Administrator. The Hiring Committee formed and began interviewing candidates, eventually offering positions to six pioneering teachers: Cathy Conner, Dan Gross, Dena Feldman, Lisa Masi, Nick Philliou, and Monica Nichols. An additional Federal start-up grant of $325,000 (also strictly limited in application) allowed the school to invest in training, purchase equipment and supplies, and engage the services of some professionals in support of facility development (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 18 June 2003"). A potential facility was identified at 93 Kerr's Corner Road in

Frelinghuysen, New Jersey, a nine-acre property adjacent to Genesis Farm with a large updated farmhouse and renovated barn. A trustee family purchased it privately (and anonymously), with the intention of selling it to the school at the first opportunity (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes:14 August 2002”). Two successful applications to the one-time-only Federal School Renovation Grant Program resulted in $970,000 for purchase of land and renovation of an existing facility (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 2 August 2002”). Trustees discovered that one corner of the barn did not meet the local requirement for schools of a 100-foot setback from the property line by less than 15 feet and siting the school there would require a variance (commonly given to public projects). Complications with the local Planning Board regarding the setback requirements and variance prompted the trustees to petition the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs to take jurisdiction over the review and approval of the site plan as well as issue the Certificate of Occupancy, duties permitted them with regard to public schools (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 03 May 2003”).

The trustees introduced themselves to State Senator Jack Ewing, a sponsor of the original Charter School legislation, who helped us arrange a meeting with senior administrators. Senator Ewing even drove three trustees, Dave McNulty, Nanci Dvorsky, and myself, to Trenton, charming his way through several office managers and administrative assistants on the speakerphone in the car en route.

After a dispiriting meeting with representatives of the New Jersey Departments of Education and Community Affairs in Trenton in which both Assistant Commissioners declined to commit to any action *at all* in support of the school's facility plan, the trustees recognized that a September 2003 opening would be impossible. In May 2003 the trustees requested and were granted an additional planning year in order to prepare the facility, which the school purchased from the private benefactors in May (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 23 July 2003"). The teachers were informed of the delay and encouraged to apply again the following year. "Freedom to Explore" and "ecozoic Edventure" days, coordinated by trustees Evonn Berube-Reiersen and Donna Best, were held on local school holidays to invite students to experience a sample of the Ridge and Valley Charter School educational philosophy in action.

Community response to the potential charter school continued to be mixed, with weekly editorials and letters to the editor in the local newspapers voicing support and opposition to the charter school plan, and local school boards joining in a complaint filed with the Council on Local Mandates with regard to charter school funding (Grape-Garvey, "Charter" A-1). A record crowd of 300 residents attended the Frelinghuysen Planning Board meetings in which the school's zoning application was addressed, prompting a change of venue to the local elementary school gym, with state troopers visibly present to maintain order (Grape-Garvey, "300" A-1). Lawn signs read "No Charter School" and "Yes, Freedom of Choice in Public Education." As the facility project took much of the trustees' attention, the staff was focused on developing financial and

administrative systems and outlining curriculum, as well as hosting community education events (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 6 August 2003”).

In December 2003, trustees responded to Academic Coordinator Jean Edwards’s curriculum-planning update with practical encouragement: “The Board of Trustees stressed their need for focusing on their vision of the flow of the day, process for facilitating multi-age grouping, and empowering children to pick projects and then enjoy the work needed to see them through from start to finish” (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 23 December 2003”). Hundreds of state-mandated policies were adopted this year, and prominent founder Lisa Kelly left the board.

At issue were contrasting views of curriculum, based on philosophical differences about determining the educational program in advance or embracing an emerging curriculum designed by the teachers themselves as they moved through the year. The balance between structure and flexibility in the educational program continues to be challenging even ten years later, despite an elegant and elaborate *Curriculum Framework*. The conflict was an early example of the difficulty of working in circle when significant disagreements arise, and was resolved only by one person withdrawing. The differences in viewpoint and communication among a few key members were too great for the circle to contain at that time, especially with all of the trustees exhausted and overwhelmed by the work at hand, the local climate of opposition, and the practical difficulties of finances, facility, and curriculum.

Luckily, despair didn't hit everyone at the same time! Circle practice helped remaining trustees support each other, relying on spirit—the energy, connection, and motivation of the group committed to in the shared vision—to remain engaged. Nanci Dvorsky often compared us to geese flying in formation: when the leader tires, leadership rotates and they all keep on flapping.

Facility development continued to preoccupy most of the trustees throughout 2003-04, a roller coaster year. Aware that local opposition and lack of action at the state level might prevent the Frelinghuysen Township Planning Board from awarding the necessary variance for the 93 Kerr's Corner Road setback in time for a September opening (if at all), the Facility Committee continued to look for other options. Trustee Dave McNulty led an exhaustive search through local tax records and made numerous site visits and cold calls to owners local and absentee. His efforts led eventually to the identification of a potential location at 1234 State Route 94 in Frelinghuysen, a 14-acre tract of farmland on the main thoroughfare.

The trustees paid careful attention to the requirements of the School Renovation Grant Program that we were relying on to finance preparation of any building. Lease of preconstructed modular classroom units would satisfy the strict terms of the program, which prevented the construction of a new facility with the grant funds. The modular units would also be designed to building code and pre-inspected, allowing us to avoid potential difficulty or delay with local inspectors. Revisions in the grants were proposed to allow the funds to be applied to the new facility; the trustees lobbied School Renovation Fund

administrator Hany Salib in person in Trenton (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 24 March 2003”). The main tactic was to present the plan with utter confidence, projecting the assurance that there could be no logical objections. The school purchased the Route 94 property with the help of a bridge loan from local bank and next-door neighbor Newton Trust Company, thanks in particular to the support of loan officer Ellen Birsner, who pitched the loan to the bank’s committee as a form of corporate community service. Without the two School Renovation grants and the cooperation of the hometown bank, the facility could not have been established.

It’s not possible to communicate adequately the intensity of the trustees’ efforts in those critical weeks and months. The Facilities and Finance Committees (the same three people: Dave McNulty, Nanci Dvorsky, and the author) met every Saturday in addition to the weekly trustee meetings on Wednesdays—often long into Thursday morning—and held phone conferences daily as the grants, loans, purchases, and sales of the two properties proceeded (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 19 November 2003”). They recognized that what they were attempting was virtually impossible, but that, as Dave McNulty often said, “The alternative—giving up—is even worse.”

From day to day, variables were introduced and addressed, obstacles presented and surmounted, fortunes raised and lowered with each DOE decision, response from a property-owner, or call from the Township Engineer. Trustee meeting minutes from the time say, for example, “We need $19,375 by Thursday” (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 23 February 2003”), or

"Evonn Reiersen has arranged a meeting for Wednesday March 19th with three of our district congressional representatives" (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 12 March 2003"). At one critical point, a trustee made a cold call to a potential benefactor, a community member with grown children and no possibility to join the school as a parent, asking for a $100,000, low-interest, eight-month loan. The anonymous benefactor agreed, and it is a credit to the passion for the project apparent in the request and in all of the trustees' efforts.

The trustees couldn't have continued without the support the shared leadership model of the circle provided, and without the help of some important outside partners. The financial assistance of several trustee families and the anonymous benefactor, the support of Newton Trust Loan officer Ellen Birsner, NonProfit Finance Fund New Jersey Director Eric Breit, New Jersey Charter Public Schools Association Executive Director Jennifer Langer, Geraldine R. Dodge Program Director, Ross Danis, and NJ state Senator Jack Ewing (R-Somerset) were crucial, both practically and emotionally. The encouragement and belief in the project they offered felt just as important as the networking or financing they facilitated. The eventual willingness of the School Renovation Grant Program New Jersey Department of Education administrator Haney Salib to allow a revision in the grant application made the convoluted process of establishing a facility possible, but only due to the persistent effort and effective persuasion of members of the Finance and Facility Committees (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 21 April 2004"). Public bids for the construction project were solicited April 23, 2004, with a September 8, 2004 opening planned.

As the facility work continued, trustees and staff on the Hiring Committee began to assemble the faculty. Six of the guides whose employment had been delayed from 2003-04 joined the faculty for 2004-05. The initial infrastructure of the office and classrooms consisted of the contents of a tractor trailer filled with used office furniture including bookcases, filing cabinets, metal office desks, tables, office chairs, etc. provided by a supporter for just $1000 and an entire room of office supplies donated by Robert McLaughlin, father of guide Lisa Masi.

Spring and summer 2004 were dominated by the construction project and financial contortions, including unanticipated setbacks like damage to newly-installed water lines by an excavator working on electrical hookups and the eleventh-hour defection of the original modular classroom supplier (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 21 April 2004”). Thanks to an ongoing focus on positive, productive relationships, particularly by Administrative Coordinator Nanci Dvorsky and trustee Co-coordinator Dave McNulty, many of the firms doing the site work offered extra services or waived charges for some overages, including Carson and Roberts Excavating, Mobilease, Power With Prestige, and clerk of the works Roberto Caputo. These considerations certainly had a financial impact, but their effect on morale was even more important for the trustees personally.

The school office continued to operate out of 93 Kerr’s Corner Road, listed for sale, while the 1234 Route 94 site was under construction. Development of curriculum, hiring and development of staff, and recruitment and enrollment of students continued throughout the spring and summer, leading up to the

September opening. Additional critical support came through the efforts of NJ Charter Public School Association Executive Director Jennifer Langer and her advocacy on the school's behalf with Ross Danis, Director of Education Programs for the Dodge Foundation. After visiting both sites and meeting with trustees and school coordinators, Danis and the Dodge Foundation responded to the school's needs by providing a unique out-of-cycle unrestricted grant for $60,000 (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 29 September 2004"), much of which was directed toward professional development specific to the RVCS mission for the newly-hired faculty, stipends for guides' attendance at the training, and, later, bonuses for staff.

When it became clear that the facility would not be ready for September 8, 2004, trustees sought alternative temporary locations at local camps and conference centers, adding the expense of facility rental to the already-strained budget. The NJ Commissioner of Education approved the Ridge and Valley Charter School opening September 7, 2004 and school began September 8, with a gathering of all the students and guides in the assembly room of the Presbyterian Camp and Conference Center in Johnsonburg, the first of two temporary locations. Academic Coordinator Guide Jean Edwards welcomed everyone and invited all to open their hearts and minds to each other and to a new way of experiencing school (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Trustee Tracks: 20 June 2005"). With a few songs led by parent volunteer Liz Marshall, students and guides immediately set to work creating the relationships and rhythms that would shape their year together.

In focus groups and interviews conducted for this study, when founders were asked to recall specific challenges faced in the founding period, “You don’t have enough paper to write them all down!” was a characteristic response. They were also asked to recall decisive individuals and events from that time, as well as their assessment of the school’s progress in actualizing the vision articulated by the original group. The challenges mentioned most frequently were the relationship with the New Jersey Department of Education, the need for personal growth and commitment from the individuals in the founding group, and the acquisition of resources, particularly the facility.

A founder intricately involved with the authorizers at the Charter Schools Office described the challenge of negotiating the “relationship with the DOE as the group tried to manifest a vision of a school that was unlike the model of the DOE in every way: relationships, paradigms, assumptions, posture. That was one of the most difficult things we dealt with.” One founder remembered the challenges of “Keeping our conviction and love. The TIME. Money. Personal growth. Endurance. Keeping everyone moving along developmentally . . . Maintaining the internal education necessary to keep the leadership circle on the same page-and moving forward together synergistically.” Another echoed, “Keeping our conviction and high level of love among serious adversity. We were like the Gingerbread Man. The adversity didn’t wear us down.” One informant remembers as crucial the integrity with which the group met obstacles, explaining, “We stayed so above-board, no sneaky anything. We would have failed if we’d dipped below, compromised our ethics.”

Practically speaking, founders remembered the development of the facility under the existing conditions as particularly difficult: “Location, location, location. And the orchestrated battle to keep us out.” “Establishing the facility. Building a school from nothing but love and effort-no money, no credit, no history. Few people know how hard that really was.” A founder articulated her reaction to one of the many obstacles, saying, “I remember the call, after we thought we had the house on Kerr’s Corner and everything was moving forward, when [the school’s attorney] told us we didn’t meet the setback requirement by, like, 10 feet. That was devastating. Ugh.”

In the interviews, founders universally remarked on the feeling that working together non-hierarchically allowed the group to achieve the impossible. They noted the power of the circle process, of leadership from every chair, to keep people focused on the shared vision and intention, to encourage respectful, considerate, loving relationships among the group, and to accept responsibility to contribute and to ask for help, offering what you can and asking for what you need (PeerSpirit). The dedication of the group to these principles and practices made amazing accomplishments possible, even, at times, fun. The honest communication and trust thus cultivated allowed everyone to share the joy as well as the disappointments.

Many watershed moments recalled by the founders relate to cooperating with the Department of Education and the difficulties faced in the process of acquiring resources and developing the facility. Of DOE relations, founder Nanci Dvorsky explains

> I think of the founding period as a separate chapter: "Trips to Trenton." Dave McNulty and I were there appealing for some easing of the firm stance the DOE was taking on whatever issue it was. They talked themselves into a place where Dave finally said, "What just happened here is an example of exactly why we need this school." All of them were struck by that. It was an example of the dynamics of power, the status quo. He was so right. . . . We could have been driving down there in fear, but we weren't. It's the result of circle practice—seriousness, and fun camaraderie.

Founder Evonn Berube Reiersen compares the school's development to natural life processes:

> There's a series of flashpoints that have to occur for something to be created, a revelatory, mysterious, magical force that has to happen. How easy it is for things to die, but these miracles happen. Think of the scientific dynamics of chlorophyll . . . String 'em all together, you get a spiral galaxy.

**Timeline: Learning Curves 2001 – 2004**

2001 Community information meetings, local opposition

Ridge and Valley Unity Charter School charter surrendered

Ridge and Valley Charter School charter application submitted

2002 RVCS application approved for September 2003 opening

Federal charter school start-up grant provides trustee and community development and training, including first PeerSpirit training with Sarah MacDougall

Ridge and Valley Learning Circles, a supporting 501(c)(3) non-profit incorporated

Administrative Coordinator Nanci Dvorsky (first employee) hired

2003 successful applications by Lisa Kelly and Kerry Barnett for School Renovation Grants of $970,000

93 Kerr's Corner Road facility purchased, local opposition from residents and Township Planning Board

DOE refusal to participate in site approval process leads to additional planning year

Consulting School Business Administrator Charles Knopf and Academic Coordinator Jean Edwards hired

Development of key policies, ongoing community education

Personal conflicts challenge circle process and lead to a resignation

2004 negotiation of revision to School Renovation Grant

Newton Trust bridge loan, 1234 State Route 94 facility purchased

Six guides hired again: Cathy Conner, Dena Feldman, Dan Gross, Lisa Masi, Monica Nichols, Nicholas Philliou

Orientation and training for staff and families

Development of facility, delays lead to negotiation for temporary site

Sept 8 Opening Day!

## Poetic Interlude: “Barry White”

Barry White

3 am, Blairstown Library, 2002.

She cries with delight, “We’re birthing a school!”

She says we’re the midwives to the long-anticipated arrival,

Labor progressing, beloved baby imminent.

We love these images

but we know,

as parents, as laborers, as lovers,

we’re just putting on

the Barry White record.

## Year One: Fall 2004 – Spring 2005

Founder Nanci Dvorsky recalls Opening Day, September 2004: "It was at the camp in Johnsonburg, a rainy day, and the kids were arriving. It was the culmination of—how-many by then? —six years of work from so many people . . . to see the kids gather and march into the assembly room. . . . That was amazing." Another founding trustee, Donna Best, adds, "I remember the kids on the first or second day of school, just sitting and waiting to be told what to do. They didn't know how to start. After only one year at the school, they became incredible. One troubled kid said later that his one year at RVCS changed his life."

Ridge and Valley asked a lot of everyone, and still does. Trustees were challenged to articulate a complex and unique vision and find the resources to facilitate its realization. School Coordinators and guides were tasked to design a functioning public elementary school from that vision, unlike any previously existing models. Students were invited to participate in their learning as they never had been asked to before, and their families to trust that this new institution with the big dreams would nurture and encourage their children safely and well. Even the staff of the Charter Schools Office of the NJ Department of Education had their expectations tested. An inspection visit by the DOE staff to the second temporary facility at the Princeton-Blairstown Center is recalled by Administrative Coordinator Nanci Dvorsky:

> There we were, walking over the bridge to the outlying cabins. They're in their suits and wingtips in the snow, the

> lake on one side, a steep drop-off into the creek on the other. I hoped they didn't notice the big 'DANGER" sign! We made it across and into the cabin. There were the kids and the guide, all bundled up in their hats and gloves, working on a chalkboard, the bunks beds pushed to the sides, the woodstove roaring. One of the DOE staff saw the stove and asked, "But doesn't that get hot?" I just had to laugh inside, thinking of the stories they'd tell back at the office!

Several graduates who attended RVCS in the first year fondly remembered eight years later the camps and cabins that hosted the school for the first four months: "*That* was fun," "the coolest stuff," "I loved going to school there."

The fall equinox celebration in September demonstrated the creativity, participation, and sharing that continue to characterize RVCS. Each class presented a poem, song, story, or play related to the change of season and to their explorations of the natural world at the camp. Field trips to Genesis Farm presented opportunities to study the various ecosystems of pond, meadow, forest, and garden. The guides in particular modeled flexibility, tenacity, and optimism, vital to any new undertaking, as they carved learning space out of the gymnasium and helped the children understand the expectations of participation, responsibility, and respect central to the RVCS community (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Trustee Tracks: 20 June 2005"). Working with limited resources

and little structure, these pioneering teachers stretched themselves and their students to co-create a different kind of education.

The site construction project on Route 94 continued through the fall, with many of the frustrating delays that often accompany such efforts. Administrative Coordinator Nanci Dvorsky spent countless hours coordinating schedules; interfacing with contractors, local authorities, and service providers; arranging for storage, transportation, and delivery of equipment and supplies; and transferring operations to the new facility, all while keeping an eye on the administrative needs of the school at the temporary sites. In November, the school moved to the second temporary site, the Princeton-Blairstown Center, an extensive outdoor education facility in Hardwick. New experiences there included working in cabins heated by woodstoves, learning to be comfortable for extended time outdoors in cold and snow, and recognizing tracks and animals' winter habits. In November, founding Academic Coordinator Jean Edwards returned to California, prompted by family needs. For trustees and staff alike, the difficulties of nurturing the newborn school were often overwhelming. Many of the adults and children found circle practice rewarding and satisfying as they began to develop skills in this style of communication, but for some the process felt frustrating, inefficient, or misguided. Parents also wondered about how much learning could be happening when their children came home with stories of days spent in the woods, on the trails, and at the lake.

Two part-time Academic Coordinators, Reenie Mahon and Donna Price, came and went through the rest of that winter, as guides (the term the founding

teachers adopted) grappled with the demands of a learner-centered, integrated, outdoor curriculum. The winter solstice celebration featured songs and stories of the season in the Princeton-Blairstown Center Lodge as students reflected on the longest night of the year. The construction project was feeling like the longest night of the year by then, too, but with perseverance and luck, the final connections and approvals were completed and students and guides moved into the facility on Route 94 on February 8, 2005. It was another close call, as the local construction official ran down the sidewalk at 8:45 am, the Certificate of Occupancy flapping in his hand, as students and families arrived for the 9 am start. Heroic efforts by parent volunteers and staff prepared the buildings indoors and out in time for the opening day, but nothing could be done about the acre of mud, which quickly became the students' delight.

The spring equinox was celebrated on the school hillside with flags, seeds, songs, and the dedication of the compost bins built by the "elders" in the oldest student group. RVCS learners of all ages explored the new location as well as the wide range of equipment and supplies finally accessible at the new site.

In April, educator and former trustee Traci Pannullo volunteered to serve as Academic Coordinator through the rest of the 2004-05 school year, sharing her expertise and providing consistency in the daily administration of the school (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 7 April 2005"). Some all-school highlights of the first spring include *The Garden Show*, a musical in celebration of Earth Day directed by Guide Nick Philliou, and, also coordinated by Guide Nick,

the Earth Olympics the last week of school, when students joined school-wide teams to practice survival skills such as fire-starting, hunting with throwing sticks, and shelter-building. Individual classes participated in daylong and overnight camping, hiking, and canoeing trips, learning valuable skills and the importance of mutual cooperation and support through their experiences together outdoors (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Trustee Tracks: 20 June 2005”).

The importance of their extended outdoor experiences remains with students years later. In 2012, some of the earliest graduates recalled the expeditions as highlights of their educational careers. When asked for a memory representative of RVCS, the majority of their anecdotes focused on outdoor expeditions and the challenges to push their boundaries of experience and self-confidence. They commented: “I had a lot of fun there. I was surprised by the freedom the teachers gave. We had prizes of Chinese food! We got to put our feet in the creek!” Others offered, “Overnights. We didn’t give in despite rain and challenges.” and “Backpacking trip. Two days and three nights . . . crucial. . . . [I] had to cope, learn. I made friends. I got along with unexpected people.” Another recalled, “[It was a] rainy hike. Some of us stayed while others went back. We ended up in the river and it was so fun. We helped each other. Helped each other across. That was always happening.”

The professional, dedicated guides persevered under extremely difficult conditions to bring their students to a new understanding of learning. As a team, they created curriculum and assessment, educated parents and students about alternatives to conventional public school practices, and brought groups of

children from many different educational backgrounds together as learning communities. The pioneer guides and Academic Coordinators of Ridge and Valley Charter School in 2004-2005 deserve great credit for their efforts: Cathy Conner, Nanci Dvorsky, Jean Edwards, Dena Feldman, Dan Gross, Reenie Mahon, Lisa Masi, Monica Nichols, Traci Pannullo, Nick Philliou, and Donna Price (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 18 August 2004"). Five eighth-graders graduated from RVCS that year in a moving school-wide ceremony. The diploma was created by student David Kligman (Class of '06):

> NAME has completed his years of experiential environmental learning in the way that we believe should be done everywhere.
> Go on and spread the word.
> Keep our planet safe.
> Walk your path,
> And make sure it goes into the woods once in a while. (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Diploma 2005")

With the facility open, the Kerr's Corner Road property sold thanks to trustee Donna Best's For Sale By Owner effort, and Year One of operation completed (survived!), the trustees caught our collective breath, reviewed our progress, and determined priorities for Year Two. The annual assessment published by the NJ Department of Education summarized that RVCS had met the criteria for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), in 41 of 41 indicators. The breakdown of standardized test scores by grade and subject on the Report were all marked "-", meaning the sample was comprised of fewer than 20, 35 or 40

students depending on the indicator, and was therefore statistically insignificant (New Jersey Department of Education, “Adequate Yearly Progress”). The Charter School Annual Report submitted by RVCS was followed by a request for Corrective Action from the Charter School Finance Office to address in particular some financial issues related to accounting practices based on irregularities of the first auditor and subsequent audit report.

Timeline Year One: 2004-2005

| | |
|---|---|
| September | Opening Day at Camp Johnsonburg |
| | Equinox Celebration |
| November | Move to Princeton-Blairstown Center |
| | Departure of Academic Coordinator Jean Edwards |
| December | Solstice Celebration |
| | Acting Academic Coordinators Reenie Mahon and Donna Price |
| January | intensive effort by families to prepare facilities |
| February | Opening Day at 1234 Route 94 |
| March | Equinox Celebration |
| April | Volunteer Acting Academic Coordinator Traci Pannullo |
| June | Graduation: first five graduates of RVCS |

Year Two: 2005 – 2006

Stability in the Academic Coordinator position was a priority for Year Two and led to the hiring of a teacher and administrator with more than 20 years’

experience in the public schools of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Of the original seven guides, six returned for a second year (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 18 August 2005”). Two different certified School Business Administrators cycled through that position, contributing to the Corrective Action Plan, particularly with regard to financial reporting procedures. The trustees, five women and one man, continued to meet weekly in PeerSpirit circle format to conduct the business of the school and further develop the skills and relationships required by non-hierarchical collaborative governance. A key principle of this process is “Ask for what you need and offer what you can.” To this end, trustees continued to develop skills in budgeting and financial planning, real estate, municipal law, zoning, and local government. Professional development in circle governance was again provided by PeerSpirit with trainers Sarah MacDougall and Ann Linnea, who worked with trustees, guides, students, and the community over a three-day visit (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 14 April 2006). Key documents were revised and updated, including the *Student & Family Handbook*, RVCS brochure, and Frequently-Asked Questions information flyer (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 12 August 2005”).

In the spring, Frelinghuysen Township assessed RVCS with back taxes in the amount of $15,000, as the school property had formerly been in agricultural production and rollback taxes may be assessed when that status changes. An appeal of the assessment filed with Frelinghuysen Township in Summer 2005 was ultimately unsuccessful, despite guidance in the law encouraging that

waivers of rollback taxes be given to schools and other public facilities (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 20 July 2005”). Another legal proceeding resulted from charges, ultimately dismissed, by the parent of a student with special needs claiming that the child was inadequately served by RVCS (Ridge and Valley Charter School, Minutes: 6 July 2006”).

The school entered into an agreement with Sun Farms Solar to install solar panels to contribute to sustainable energy use. Parents self-organized a Parent-Guide Organization (PGO), which met frequently and proposed several fundraising projects, published a weekly newsletter, and sent representatives to most trustee meetings. The Executive Summary of the *Annual Report* for 2005-06 lists these accomplishments:

> Hired an experienced and effective Academic Coordinator . . . Completed the first financial audit, which included the 21-month start-up period . . . Improved the quality of the business administration professional services . . . Built stronger circle-based governance and community participation. (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Annual Report 2005-2006,* 6)

Efforts continued in relation to creating and documenting integrated curricula and enhancing special education services, while professional development was provided to guides through workshops including Hands-On Astronomy, Service Learning, beekeeping, Project Wild, biodynamic gardening, curriculum design, earth literacy, multiple intelligences, the Delaware Watershed, and Expeditionary Schools. Parents and the community were active in the

school and contributed to class celebrations, after-school clubs, physical plant maintenance, monthly school lunches, and publications including a weekly newsletter, student literary magazine, and annual yearbook (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Annual Report 2005-2006,* 10). In June, eight students graduated, joining the initial five from the class of 2005. The 2006 Department of Education School Report Card, like that of 2005, indicated RVCS had met the goals for Adequate Yearly Progress, and included "-" or "TOO FEW" for every specific test score criterion (New Jersey Department of Education, "Adequate Yearly Progress").

For students, the 2005-2006 school year built on 2004-05, incorporating outdoor experiences for everyone, from daily hikes and "wonder walks" for the youngest students to three- and four-day hiking and camping expeditions on the Appalachian Trail by the older children. Referring to adventure challenges such as expeditions, high- and low-ropes courses, team-building activities, and cooperative games, alumni commented positively in the focus groups on the effect of these experiences, with one early graduate saying "[I] now have done even more to push boundaries" and another proudly declaring, "Skills! No big deal! I've *done* stuff!"

Regarding circle specifically, trustees continued to practice and develop skills in the methodology, and to encourage all groups in the school to do the same. Personal commitment to integrity, sensitivity, patience, and humility is an easily-overlooked requirement for the success of the practice. PeerSpirit guidelines highlight "personal preparation" for circle gatherings; it's easy to think

of this as reviewing the agenda and documents to be discussed, setting up the room, and other material activities completed the day or week before. In fact, personal preparation for circle practice is an ongoing effort at self-awareness and self-control. School board meetings are public; the RVCS trustees encourage students, families, guides, and the community to participate. Visitors join the group, sitting alongside everyone else in the circle, and are specifically included, in contrast to many school boards who sit on a dais above the audience with the expectation that non-board-members speak only during the designated public participation period.

Public participation is also specifically scheduled at RVCS board meetings, when anyone can bring an issue to the group, but guests are invited to participate in the meetings as fully as they choose. However, having individuals come and go in the circle does present challenges. Attendees may choose to ignore the circle agreements and explanations printed on the formal agenda, or may have limited experience with or appreciation for a collaborative circle format for meetings. Explaining patiently how and why certain procedures are followed can be time-consuming and sometimes even irritating for long-term members committed to an ongoing circle.

Keeping the experienced members focused on the work and the process requires continuous effort, let alone orienting and guiding newcomers, all while still trying to discuss the issues on the agenda thoughtfully and make decisions efficiently. For the RVCS trustees, acknowledging the commitment to circle practice on the agenda of every meeting and explaining the conscious

commitment to attend to the group's process is important to facilitate the inclusion of guests. It's crucial for people to understand the guardian role and the explicit shared responsibility of monitoring the group process. Especially to newcomers to this kind of meeting, a soft bell ringing when someone is speaking can seem insulting to the speaker. It is critical to circle's success for everyone to recognize that the guardian's chime is not arbitrarily cutting a speaker off for being annoying or straying off topic, but is meant to initiate a pause for the whole group to refocus and then explicitly agree on how to proceed (PeerSpirit). In other models, such situations might be resolved by interruption, raised voices, or a call to order from the Chair; the pause in a circle meeting encourages everyone to take a breath, recall the shared intention, and recommit to it consciously. Even more difficult than orienting visitors is when an ongoing member of the group accepts the responsibilities only superficially and does not commit to necessary self-reflection, personal preparation and self-development. Addressing the behavior of those members is a test of the group's commitment and conviction.

## Year Three: 2006-2007

The multi-faceted activities of the prior year continued to develop in the 2006-2007 school year, with the majority of staff continuing in their roles, augmented by the addition of support guides (particularly to facilitate guides' planning periods and breaks) and classroom aides (to support specific students with special needs) for a total of eighteen staff members. Traci Pannullo shifted

her role to Curriculum Coordinator and was particularly active in drafting a framework for innovative, emergent curricula, including scope and sequence for areas such as Expeditionary Skills in addition to the Core Curriculum Content subject areas of math, social studies, and language arts. Guides were offered stipends for curriculum writing days and a Summer Curriculum Writing Intensive to support their efforts in this area (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes 18 January 2007").

A trustee sub-committee reviewed the school's Compensation Plan, recommending salary adjustments for those guides hired in the first, cash-strapped, year. Several grants were obtained, including from the Rural Education Assistance Program ($23,000 for rural schools to improve and support technology use), the New Jersey Charter Public Schools Association Smarter Charter Program ($10,000 to develop a custom-designed curriculum database), and the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program ($8,000 for preservation and protection of native wildlife habitat on the school's property) (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Annual Report 2006-2007,* 5). In 2007, twelve graduates joined the ranks of alumni and spoke movingly at the whole-school graduation ceremony of their memories of sledding, raising the yurt, and their four-day canoe trip. The annual NJDOE School Report Card stated the school had made Adequate Yearly Progress, with "-" or "TOO FEW" in each test score reporting space.

Behind the scenes, challenges to circle process appeared in the trustee group. Some members chose to disregard the established principles and

practices, pursuing personal agendas instead of the shared plan. Objections to trustee decisions were voiced outside of meetings, without context, and to families and staff members not directly involved, rather than being brought to the circle to consider and resolve together. The group made efforts to reintroduce and affirm the agreements through group development activities and specific discussion of process, with an internal corrective action plan put into effect.

As peers in the PeerSpirit model, no one member has authority over the others to insist individuals change their behavior. However, a working school board is the employer for all staff and has legal responsibility for the school's operations, so the group can and must address circle-breaking actions. Circle is easy when everyone is working at it, but there are fewer models for addressing hypocritical or undermining conduct by individuals in the group. As in so many other areas, the trustees relied on intentional effort, explicit communication, and the support of the group process to figure it out as they went along.

## Year Four: 2007-2008

The trustees drew on the expertise of the New Jersey School Boards Association in preparing goals for the 2007-2008 school year, for which the lead person and staff develop a plan of action. This was, coincidentally, also the year of the first application for Charter Renewal. In New Jersey, charters are granted for an initial four years, with comprehensive review in Year Three for a five-year renewal and subsequent applications prior to the conclusion of each five-year

term (State of New Jersey, *N. J. Administrative Code, Charter Schools [N.J.A.C. 6A:11])*.

Some of the trustees recognized that divergence within the trustee circle (including voting volunteer trustees and non-voting school employees in leadership positions) threatened the school's ability to fulfill its fundamental mission. While the New Jersey Department of Education auditors for the Charter Renewal would likely not recognize a problem, trustees acknowledged privately that modeling paradigm shift away from hierarchy and toward individual responsibility for shared leadership is a fundamental basis of the school's vision and could not be compromised. Staff members with long service in traditional school districts have been among the most resistant to collaborative practice. Exercise of "informal power" through avoidance, favoritism, gossip, division, or bullying are familiar tactics in hierarchical institutions, but undermine the collaborative process.

One trustee said at the time that she'd rather shutter the school (even after all that effort) than replace the founding principle of mutually-enhancing relationships with conventional educational hierarchy. The group was responsible to effect a transition in a key player with integrity, discretion, and collaboration, without the cooperation of that player and within the circle structure operating under public school board requirements for transparency. It was a tough year. Mindful of how important PeerSpirit circle practice had been for them, the trustees set a school-wide goal to recommit to circle process and the concepts of personal responsibility and mutually-enhancing relationships. They

committed to modeling them in all interactions. Trustees accepted the challenge to “walk the walk” and explicitly relied on circle practice to work through difficulties within the group. The agreements, principles, and practices of PeerSpirit circle offer tools to speak honestly, but personal will and courage are still required to address issues directly when correction or constructive criticism is needed.

In an ideal situation, a member who has chosen to diverge from the group’s agreements and goals recognizes this, acknowledges the absence of shared spirit, and withdraws. This has happened on occasion at Ridge and Valley Charter School with positive results. A peaceful departure, however, requires self-knowledge and reflection, often the very elements absent in conflict situations. What happens when the person undermining the group is determined to stay? The matter is additionally complicated in public school governance and employment. Clear information and monitoring of requested corrective action must be scrupulously documented and the staff member in question given opportunities to improve. In a hierarchical model, the boss monitors the corrective action and ultimately decides who stays or goes, how, and when; not a lot of explanation is usually required, not even of a school board, when tenure is not involved.

Collaboration, in contrast, entails a demanding level of honesty, integrity, and commitment to hold each other responsible. Disregard of the shared understandings must be faced openly and discussed as honestly and productively as possible. For the Ridge and Valley Charter School trustees, the

situation was complicated further by the individual's popularity and charm. It became apparent, however, that preference for traditional school hierarchy precluded commitment to circle principles; the group could not accommodate that wide a divergence from the central value of promoting mutually-enhancing relationships. After a successful transition, several trustees commented they were proud of how the group acted with integrity throughout the difficult yearlong process, even when community and staff members were intentionally misinformed to encourage their opposition to the change.

In addition to dealing privately with personnel challenges, the trustees were engaged publicly with parents' concerns about academic preparation in math and, in the lower grades, reading (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 19 July 2007"). A subcommittee of parents and staff conducted extensive review of published math curricula over the course of months and eventually recommended two multi-year textbook series they felt fit best in the RVCS context. Though some trustees considered adopting a published curriculum for math a compromise from the completely-integrated project-based program they envisioned, they responded positively to the guides' request for the support provided by an established program. Whether formally trained in a College of Education or alternate-route teachers coming from other backgrounds, the guides had limited experience in designing and implementing original curricula and, in particular, integrated programs. Resources in support of the Ridge and Valley vision from many organizations were thoughtfully adapted into practical units and experiential lesson plans.

In relation to language arts, Curriculum Coordinator Traci Pannullo began exploring the Readers and Writers Workshop model developed at Teachers College, Columbia University, by Lucy Calkins and Nancie Atwell, which embraces a learner-centered, individualized approach. Guides participated in professional development in the math curriculum and language arts programs, redesigned the daily schedule to include school-wide blocks specifically for these subjects, and instigated the use of nationally-normed standardized assessments in reading and math twice a year for formative use (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 20 March 2008").

The New Jersey Department of Education conducted an extensive site visit and review of the application for charter renewal, which was approved in February of 2008 (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 21 February 2008"). The school year concluded with the departure of the Academic Coordinator and the resignation of a founding trustee. The board members increased their awareness of behavior and confidentiality requirements. The trustees committed to a revised shared leadership model for 2008-2009, comprised of a four-person Leadership Team drawn from current staff: Administrative Coordinator Nanci Dvorsky, Kindergarten Guide and Integration Guide Lisa Masi, Differentiated Learning Coordinator Rowena McNulty, and Curriculum Coordinator Traci Pannullo (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 20 March 2008"). Nine students graduated that spring. The 2008 School Report Card once again indicated RVCS met the Adequate Yearly progress criteria, with no data in the sample fields, since the number of students

taking each test was fewer than the required sample size (New Jersey Department of Education, “Adequate Yearly Progress”).

## Year Five: 2008-2009

Illogical as it is in our consistently mutable natural world, people are resistant to change, and the RVCS community is no exception. Throughout 2008-2009, the trustees and Leadership Team worked through the fallout of the leadership transition among staff and community. Requirements of school board confidentiality and a commitment to discretion made this very difficult to negotiate, as the trustees were extremely limited in scope of response to community misperceptions and misinformation. The conventional New Jersey public education paradigm of Us versus Them was exploited to the detriment of burgeoning relationships of collaboration and trust at RVCS. Groups wanting to use circle in established traditional hierarchies need to be mindful of this legacy and its potentially damaging effects.

Gaps became apparent in previous efforts to improve student behavior, provide and document appropriate special education services, and assess teacher performance and required immediate remediation. It took concerted energy to retrain people to see the team of Administrative Coordinator, Curriculum Coordinator, Differentiated Learning Coordinator, and Integration Guide as organizers and facilitators rather than authoritarian principals and vice-principals (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 17 July, 2008”). Having one person “in charge” is familiar and convenient; being responsible for

respectfully bringing concerns to various individuals and moving through the responsibility chain prudently requires a different kind of effort.

In response to a perceived bullying problem, a group of parents designated themselves “the Peace CORe” and met regularly to revise the school’s required anti-bullying policy and to research behavior and discipline programs to recommend. Some members of this group joined a small committee of guides to design a “Medicine Wheel” behavior program, adapted from a system used with adjudicated youth, which tracks children’s movement through behaviors associated with Mouse, Coyote, Buffalo, and Eagle (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 18 September 2008”).

Simultaneously, trustees held each other responsible for exemplary behavior as members of the school community and parents; quite a lot of meeting time was directed to this topic. Resignation of founding trustees Donna Best and Evonn Berube-Reiersen and the addition of three new volunteer trustees Dave Paulson, Tom Kelleher, and Jay Bacco changed the make-up of the board, with founding members in the minority for the first time, and coincidentally, a shift in gender balance from the previously mostly-female group to majority male (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 16 October 2008”). Eight students graduated in June 2009, bringing total alumni to forty-two. The NJDOE School Report Card was identical to previous years, stating Ridge and Valley had made Adequate Yearly Progress and that the sample size of test-takers was too small to be reported (New Jersey Department of Education, “Adequate Yearly Progress”).

During the research for this project in 2012, alumni from all years were asked about their subsequent education. After graduating from 8th grade at Ridge and Valley, students have pursued a wide range of educational options, including “unschooling” (unstructured, learner-driven activities), homeschooling (with various content and structure), attendance at local conventional public high schools, local and regional public magnet high schools and academies, vocational-technical high schools, local and regional private or parochial high schools, independent preparation for General Educational Development (GED) tests, and part-time or full-time attendance at community colleges and four-year institutions such as County College of Morris, Warren and Sussex County Community Colleges, Rutgers, the New School, New York University, Stevens Institute of Technology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Yale. It is notable how many graduates independently have pursued personal and community projects including international travel and community service, creative arts exhibitions and performances, and the development of organizations such as an independent theatre company for children and teens.

In the 2012 focus groups, the graduates were questioned whether their Ridge and Valley Charter School experience impacted their subsequent education. The participants uniformly referenced their ability to work productively with adults: “. . . being able to talk to adults as easy as talking to kids,” and “[It impacted me] positively, because I now know how to communicate with teachers as guides instead of feared overlords. The knowledge I gained at RVCS was important because it was transferable to other aspects of life that I experience

now." They commented on the self-direction and responsibility for their own education that they felt RVCS had encouraged and on their awareness of the range of options open for designing their own educational experiences: "[I learned] how to think for myself as a person and figure it out." Students said, "It definitely gave me the ability to work with adults," and "RVCS teaches you a different way to live . . . you get cool stuff without the power or charades." One student who described unpleasant prior school experiences responded that "RVCS made me willing to go to school at all."

Graduates also shared criticism of preparation in conventional study skills and "basic skills" in some aspects of math and language arts. They continue to seek opportunities for individualized learning in high schools and colleges, and some study independently to make up for gaps they perceive in their academic preparation: "the mission is very vital and very noble but you need to be realistic and see that no one will take you seriously if you don't have the core academics." "I had a lot of gaps—in history, in geography—but now I'm in all honors classes." One graduate describes how she came to rely on "my own judgment of priorities. I can't bend to others' rules . . . I know there are alternatives—even about homework, tests, due dates." Another's insight is "I learned 'normal' is not synonymous with 'right.' One thing RVCS taught me to be very powerful, to have confidence in yourself because the way that things are done is not necessarily the way that things should be done."

Alumni felt prepared for being outside and appreciated the value of learning outdoors and studying nature, one expressing pride in "environmental

awareness years before it was on the news." An alumnus summarizes the sentiment expressed by others, claiming "It has had a positive impact on my education. I think RVCS's concept of experiential education taught me how to learn, and also how to use what I learn. It put the rest of my education into perspective."

Graduates overall said they would recommend RVCS to prospective students, though several note that the unconventional practices of the school are not suitable for everyone. "It was so much better than any other place," one said, while another described the school as "Fun. Feels like summer camp more than school." A graduate commented that prospective students may feel at home at RVCS "especially if they've had an experience of being bullied" at another school and "It really makes you feel comfortable about who you are and gives you the power and knowledge to know that no one can change who you are." One concluded, "Yes, I would recommend it because [it] instills values into children that last a lifetime and widens their perspectives in the world and how they think."

## Year Six: 2009 – 2010

The Leadership Team continued to evolve in 2009-2010, with the same members adjusting the roles and responsibilities and continuing to educate the guides and families in the shared leadership model. A committee of trustees developed and administered a more formal annual Leadership Team review to provide feedback on the group's performance based on input from a range of constituents, including staff, students, and families (Ridge and Valley Charter

School, “Minutes: 18 February 2010”). An early draft of the *Curriculum Framework* was adopted which designates integrated Key Learning Experiences within a series of age-appropriate programmatic lenses (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 6 May 2010”). Fall student-led individual conferences with parents, guardians, and teachers and the spring Celebration of Learning became established in the annual rhythm of the school, with positive responses from students, families, and guides. The *Integrated Math* and *Connected Math* series continued to be used in school-wide math blocks, the Readers and Writers Workshop model formed the basis for language arts in every grade, and the school library was distributed among the classrooms for ease of access to all students (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 17 September 2009”).

An initiative to improve the assessment and delivery of services to students with state-designated special needs led the school to engage the services of an in-house Child Study Team comprised of consulting school psychologist and counselor, social worker, and on-staff Case Manager in place of the contracted Special Education services used previously. One goal of the change was to reduce the number of students affected by “pull-out” and Resource Room assignments and instead to integrate students in diverse class groupings with appropriate special-needs support from certified guides within the regular class setting as much as possible (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 17 September 2009”). The Finance Committee continued to budget conservatively and met the goal of offering medical insurance benefits to all full-time staff. Co-Coordinator responsibilities were transferred to trustee Pati Uzar,

demonstrating rotating leadership and marking the transition from leadership by founders to their successors. Community partnerships with local schools and organizations demonstrated that the dire predictions of the charter school's negative impact on the local schools were unfounded (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 6 May 2010"). Ten graduates joined the alumni. The annual School Report Card indicated Adequate Yearly Progress had been made; "-" or "TOO FEW" appeared in the test score categories (New Jersey Department of Education, "Adequate Yearly Progress").

## Year Seven: 2010 – 2011

The completion of a custom-designed database for organizing original curriculum units and generating student reports assisted guides as their repertoire of creative lesson plans expanded in 2010-2011. Tools within the database link activities to relevant Core Standards as well as to Ridge and Valley Charter School mission-related academic and non-academic goals (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes: 23 September 2010"). Refinement of the *Curriculum Framework* clarified the importance of opportunities for students to design learning experiences, which included that year a presentation at the local library to bring attention to Banned and Challenged Books Week, reconstruction of a play structure at the Community Supported Garden at Genesis Farm, and assisting with a native species garden at Lusscroft Farm (Primerano 5).

Ridge and Valley Charter School was recognized with the Garden State Green Award for elementary or middle school that has made a significant

contribution to the environment (Kipp) and the school garden, orchard, and greenhouse featured prominently in learning experiences for all grades, with more area in production each year. Students participated in the Trout in the Classroom Project, which raises trout hatchlings from eggs to small fry that are released in the local river, and the regional Solar Sprints, for which students design small solar-powered cars and race other middle-school students from the area.

The trustees determined to add two additional modular classroom buildings in order to expand enrollment gradually to the charter-approved maximum of 135 students and to provide more flexible space options for the students and staff of twenty-two (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 7 April 2011”). The Planning Board meetings approving the expansion went unremarked in the community, quite in contrast to the 300 participants in 2003. The new classrooms were completed in fall of 2011. The NJDOE School Report Card accessible for 2011 indicates Adequate Yearly Progress was made, too few students tested to provide significant statistics (New Jersey Department of Education, “Adequate Yearly Progress”).

The thirteen members of the Class of 2011 customized their graduation ceremony with personal artwork, recitations of original poetry, prepared speeches, performances of original songs, and reflections on community service learning projects they had completed. The graduation ceremonies take place each year during the school day, and all of the students and guides are present along with the graduates’ families, invited guests, and members of the

community. Several of these young people participated in the 2012 focus groups for this project. The graduates' responses to the question of the school's mission featured numerous references to interconnection, also apparent in the graduation ceremony.

In most cases, the parents were the source of initial encounter of the child with the school, and several alumni described their family values as corresponding to those expressed by RVCS. Using phrases like "ecosystem awareness," "cooperation with the planet," and "brighter, greener future," graduates acknowledged the primacy of ecological literacy in their characterizations of the school's mission. Alumni described the school's goal as to "teach and promote an attitude and culture of social and environmental sustainability;" "to educate the children of today to work together, be friendly, comfortable in their own skin, aware of the planet, aware of their actions, and be the trustworthy and kindhearted adults of tomorrow;" and "to show that what you learn in a classroom actually has some relevance and meaning in the real world."

Graduates also included observations about the culture of collaboration expressed in the circle practice used throughout the school. While several found aspects of it tedious ("It took *five hours* to get to all thumbs-up or sideways!"), they recognized its impact on the school culture. Non-hierarchical, collaborative governance encouraged autonomy and respect for each individual. A graduate responded "I think of the unique ways the guides in the classrooms will choose to resolve conflict (for example, circle). It's a mindset I still feel very valuable to me

now. It's one of the biggest things. There's something so powerful about that format."

In the focus groups, both founders and graduates noted personal development and connection with the natural world among the aspects of the school's mission they valued most. They talked about the importance of "the opportunity, in context, for personal growth and expansion of awareness and understanding while simultaneously developing deep connections, philosophical understandings based on the work" and "collaborative, circle-based practice. It's been transformational." A founder described the challenge to young people to be "inquisitive, questioning . . . to make decisions and be proactive, to be active citizens rather than passive." In relation to the students, an awareness of the adults' unique responsibility and opportunity to contribute to a hopeful sustainable future shows through the commitment to outdoor education, learner-centered experiences, and an expansive sense of self, "becoming in touch and respecting nature, as well as loving the outdoors."

The graduates, without exception, described adventures in the outdoors as among their most cherished RVCS experiences:

> I remember 8th grade year on our four-day over night. It seemed like most of the clicks [sic] vanished and every one worked together and had fun. Sure, people got into their regular groups to talk every now and then but it seemed like more respect and equality existed during this time. It led me

> to believe that despite everyone's differences, we could all work together and function.

When asked which aspects of the mission were personally important, the overwhelmingly consistent response related to multi-aged grouping. Alumni appreciated the variety within their education, commenting favorably on having different grade-levels in their groups and working with children of various ages throughout the school, praising the “mixed grades” and explaining students “liked and hung out with different ages,” “fit in right away” and “became more connected with younger kids.” They said there was “no way you can’t fit in” and characterized their mentoring relationships with younger students as “an older brother-sister feeling—very positive,” expressing some surprise that “you actually care about them” after working together, saying “. . . everyone at RVCS was a community. I would know the kids in my class as well as myself and I would know the younger kids as well as my cousin or neighbor.” Students expressed appreciation for the quality and tenor of relationships with the adults in the school as well, noting the teachers’ attitude of respect for the students and “good teaching methods, seminar-style, circle practice.” One graduate contrasted students’ role at RVCS with that at other institutions, stating

> Yes, I think the idea of letting the students express their creativity and opinions is important. It is possible to find this in a public school, but it is not to the same degree as what is found at RVCS. In my current school, creativity is mostly

found in art classes and the opinion of the students is really only represented by an overarching student council.

As more RVCS graduates move into secondary and higher education, their reflections on their school experiences will continue to illuminate the impact of RVCS efforts at paradigm shift in public education.

## Year Eight: 2011 – 2012

Ridge and Valley Charter School trustees commented positively on a sense of stability and equilibrium in the school. Many experienced and tenured faculty and staff, working in an atmosphere of collaboration and mutual commitment to excellence, developed and revised curriculum. A focus on student-led independent projects led to interesting proposals for a variety of relevant school and community service activities directed by students. The Leadership Team continued to grow in their understanding of how the mission can be manifested in a public school, and in their ability to interact in shared leadership roles.

The educational program described in the *Curriculum Framework* offered a comprehensive foundation to support creativity in teaching and learning and systems to collect and share data and experience. In cooperation with Rutgers University, a rain garden for water management was installed and planted on the site. The state's new Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying law went into effect and a new requirement was established for charter schools to maintain an escrow account of $75,000 for expenses in case of closure (a significant

percentage of the annual RVCS budget of ~$1.8 million). Initiated by a thirteen-year-old student, RVCS hosted environmental activist Julia Butterfly Hill for a day with students and an evening community presentation (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes: 19 April, 2012”). Thirteen students graduated in 2012, including my son Albert, who began first grade at RVCS when the school opened in 2004.

For the first time, the annual School Report Card indicated RVCS had not met the Adequate Yearly Progress criteria for middle school (8th grade) Math and Language Arts, initiating the first year of a five-year School Improvement requirement. Though the number of students per test section remained too few to be statistically significant, the aggregate score reported in the Total Population category did not reach the designated target (New Jersey Department of Education, “Adequate Yearly Progress”). RVCS was assigned Annual Progress Targets for years 2012-13 through 2016-17, incrementally raising the percentage of students scoring Proficient or Advanced Proficient from the 2012 level of 62.2% to 79.2% in 2017 (New Jersey Department of Education, “ESEA”).

Despite having experienced staff familiar with Department of Education metrics and priorities, careful analysis of the RVCS students’ standardized test results had not been undertaken in the years when “Adequate Yearly Progress” targets had been reported met. A school culture de-emphasizing the importance of standardized test scores, as well as philosophical objections to standardized testing on the part of some trustees, families, and staff contributed to the lack of

attention to oversight of test score indicators. The 2012 Charter School Performance Agreement brought that to an abrupt halt.

## Year Nine: 2012 – 2013

In July of 2012, the New Jersey Department of Education adopted a new Performance Framework for assessment of charter schools, which designates criteria and benchmarks for performance in three areas: governance, finance, and academics. The five-year timetable required Ridge and Valley to use the Framework as the basis for its successful renewal application. All indicators in the Governance and Finance areas met or exceeded the requirements. However, as trustees and Leadership Team prepared the application, it was apparent that the school was not meeting the benchmarks in the academic category, the sole criteria being 4th and 8th grade results on the NJ-ASK Math and Language Arts standardized tests. The Department relies on these measures despite significant research suggesting that standardized testing is a limited and often-flawed measure of student learning (Fairtest, "Common Core Assessment Myths and Realities"). Student scores had first been indicated as an issue in the 2012 School Report Card, though the level of detail and method of comparison in the subsequent Performance Framework showed significantly-increased priority now attached to these indicators.

The trustees and Leadership Team initiated a plan in fall 2012 to raise students' and families' awareness of the importance of the test scores to the Department of Education's evaluation of the school. Guides were encouraged to

incorporate consistent low-key preparation for the types of topics and problems featured in the tests, and to draw students' attention to how aspects of the integrated RVCS experience might appear on a subject test. After the rigorous Charter Renewal Application and January Site Visit by five DOE staff, the Ridge and Valley Charter School charter was renewed for five years in February 2013. Feedback from the site visit indicated that the DOE evaluators were impressed with every aspect of the school and observed school-wide commitment to its mission of innovative, integrated education, with some team members commenting they would like their own children to attend a school like RVCS. However, the renewal was accompanied by a one-year academic probation, based on the Performance Framework criteria, i.e., scores and comparisons of the 4th and 8th grade NJ-ASK tests for Math and Language Arts.

In the required Probation Remediation Plan, the school's goals in relation to the metric are presented as "Substantial improvement in NJ ASK overall absolute scores in ELA and Math in 2013 with continued increases in subsequent years to meet the standard of 75% proficiency within the current charter term" (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Probation"). The Plan commits to incremental improvements reflecting the targets in the 2012 School Improvement Plan, which projected a 75% Proficient or Advanced Proficient status for 2015-16 (New Jersey Department of Education, "School Improvement").

Results of the May 2013 administration of the NJASK tests showed 76% of Language Arts test-takers were in the Proficient or Advanced Proficient categories, up from 52% in 2012; Math scores improved much less, from 65%

Proficient and Advanced Proficient in 2012 to 66% in 2013 (Dvorsky, Re: NJASK). The results suggest that at least in Language Arts, the school's 2012-13 efforts to improve the community's understanding of and receptivity to the importance of the test scores to the Department of Education and to offer consistent attention to prepare for success on the instrument within the existing educational program were effective.

Seven students graduated in May 2013, including four children who began kindergarten at Ridge and Valley that first day at Camp Johnsonburg in September 2004, the first group to complete their entire elementary school program at RVCS.

In Fall of 2013, charter schools were compelled to sign a new annual Charter School Performance Agreement, adopting the benchmarks in the 2012 Charter School Performance Framework, which, among other requirements, obliges charter schools to outperform their sending districts by certain percentages, no matter what the performance of the sending districts, or their priority on testing. Efforts to discuss, amend, or negotiate the Framework resulted in a few language changes by the Department of Education, but no substantive easing of the Framework's test score requirements, nor introduction of additional assessment measures more relevant to an integrated, experiential curriculum.

The current administration of the New Jersey Department of Education is committed to universally-applied assessment based on limited performance indicators ($4^{th}$ and $8^{th}$ grade annual standardized tests in Math and Language

Arts), and the Office of Charter Schools to the idea that charter schools should outscore non-charters on the same testing, irrespective of the specific mission, focus, or innovative practices of the charter. Review of the Charter School Performance Framework and its implications for RVCS follow in Chapter Five.

Educators support appropriate assessment with appropriate benchmarks, and RVCS has long been committed to finding or developing these instruments; for us, the 2012-13 Charter Renewal process, 2012 Performance Framework, and 2013 Performance Agreement have brought the longstanding issue of school-wide assessment to the forefront. The existing DOE measures seem inadequate to represent the range of effort and expertise of Ridge and Valley Charter School and its students. Two age groups' comparative scores on fill-in-the-bubbles tests in two subjects can't convey very much about developing skills in collaborative, respectful relationships, learning to love the woods, or feeling at home in the classroom, community, bioregion, and planet. The Renewal with academic probation presents challenge and opportunity, with assessment and documentation at the center of the conversation.

## Chapter Four: Circle Governance at Ridge and Valley Charter School

In her groundbreaking 1995 work, *Calling the Circle, the First and Future Culture*, author Christina Baldwin traces the ancestry of humans gathering in council to advise and decide. The circle shape itself, she explains, appears as a primary symbol in isolated cultures around the world and is identifiable as a Jungian archetype, an image from the human collective unconscious. Jung's research identified the circle and "sun wheel", a pie cut into eight pieces, appearing in many guises, including the medicine wheel, the wheel of the seasons, the mandala, the zodiac, and the dharma wheel (42). Baldwin theorizes that gathering in circle arose naturally as the earliest hominids began to control the use of fire and to carry its heat, cooking ability, and light with them as they moved around. Picture any campfire; the circle image resonates.

Control of fire enabled early hunters and gatherers to offer others safety, heat, and food, which led to larger community groups and more complex social organization. Baldwin and Ann Linnea posit that early social structure took inspiration from the daily experience of the physical space of circle, a rim surrounding a common source of sustenance (*Circle Way* 5). It is believed that

*homo erectus* began controlling fire in the Lower Paleolithic Era 200,000 to 400,000 years ago, and transferred this knowledge to early *homo sapiens* around 165,000 years ago; archeological evidence in South Africa includes fire rings 125,000 years old (Baldwin and Linnea 5). The social space of circle has accompanied the human journey from the earliest times; a shared evolution of people and circle is certainly conceivable.

Referring to the work of neurolinguist Stephen Pinker, who has traced the development of the language center of the frontal lobes of fossilized crania and identifies use of language as characteristic of *homo sapiens*, Baldwin and Linnea describe fire and its concomitant social pattern as a critical factor assuring human survival.

> This combination—*fire*, which provided the capacity for extended physical gathering; *tools*, which supported hunting and gathering and eventually agriculture and architecture; and *language*, which provided a way to organize experience, transmit knowledge, and process human thought and feeling—has proved to be an unbeatable combination. (5)

The authors believe that the archetypal resonance of gathering in a circle activates in modern humans a capacity to magnify and transform energy, to express remarkable synergistic creativity and imagination (Baldwin and Linnea 6). From early struggles with seemingly insurmountable obstacles—funding, facility, logistics, recruitment—the Ridge and Valley Charter School founders

experienced this to be true. Many believe that without circle, there would be no school.

Research and practice in the PeerSpirit circle methodology was introduced very early in the orientation of the school founders. Meeting in a democratic circle from the beginning, the group reviewed the process outlined by Christina Baldwin in her innovative books and online guide to PeerSpirit methodology. Start-up grant funding provided personal training for the group with Dr. Sarah MacDougall, a PeerSpirit instructor and ongoing mentor. The experience of meeting in a circle based on these principles and practices was transforming. Brief description of the basic components illuminates the seemingly simple, common sense methodology of this revolutionary practice.

The accompanying diagram, available for free download on the PeerSpirit website, sketches the key parts of the work (see fig. 2).

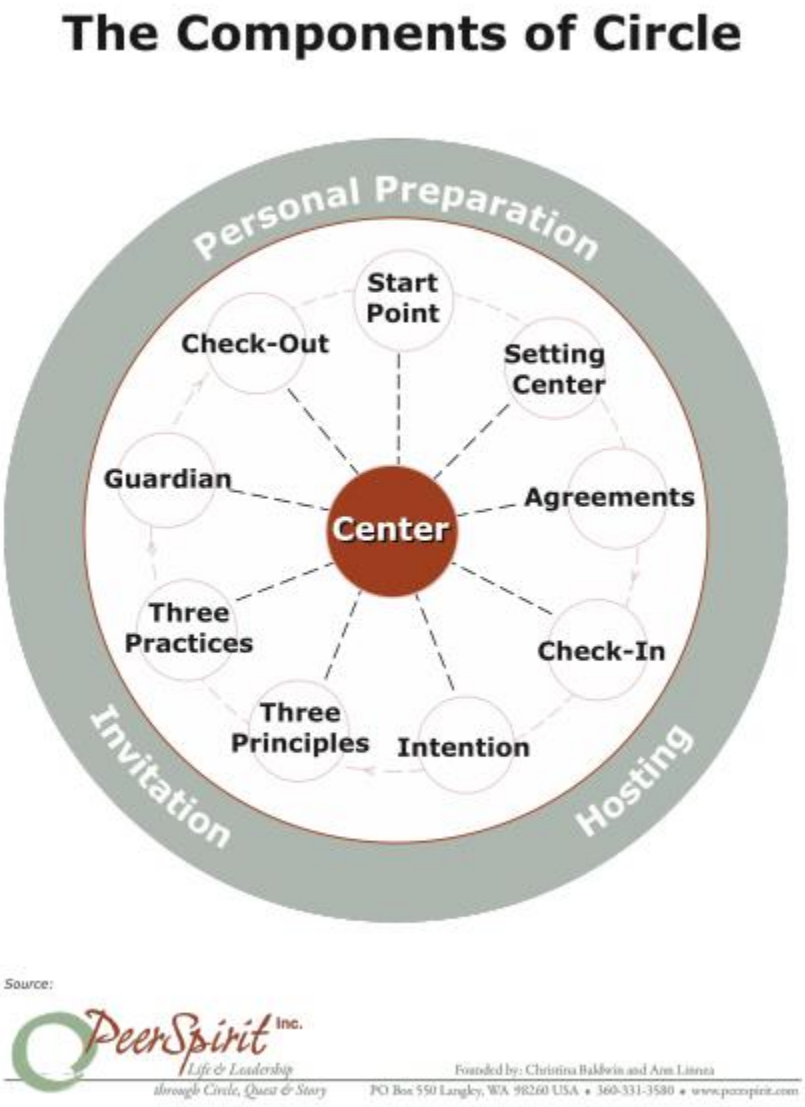


Figure 2. “The Components of Circle”, Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, PeerSpirit, Inc., 2010, Web, 22 July 2011.

Shared leadership and shared responsibility are central to the PeerSpirit philosophy; explicit understanding of the conditions that govern the circle process is expected among all participants. This is not the kind of meeting to hide in the back row and check email. Seated in a ring of chairs, everyone is fully visible, present and engaged, accountable to everyone else and to the intention of the

gathering. Rather than a leaderless group, the PeerSpirit method defines each person on the rim as a leader and participant, gathered around a tangible, intentional center representing an intangible collective spirit of shared purpose (Baldwin, *Circle Way* 77). These tools of structure and process foster elevated participation.

Personal preparation, invitation, and hosting appear on the perimeter of the diagram and define the foundation for the encounter. All members are responsible for orienting themselves to the purpose of the meeting, the context of the proposed conversation, and the expectations of democratic collaboration. An individual voluntarily serves as host and determines and communicates the logistics and intention of the meeting, invites participants, disseminates information, and prepares the physical space. The host remains responsible during the meeting for welcoming the group, communicating the agenda, revising it if necessary, and attending to the agreed-upon structure. Unlike a facilitator, the host is actively engaged in the proceedings, an equal, collaborative, member (Baldwin, *Circle Way* 20). Baldwin delineates that facilitators often observe group process and encourage others' participation while remaining detached (think of a caterer at a party), while in a PeerSpirit circle, the host, like all of the others, is responsible for her own contribution and for the well-being of the group (the home cook joining guests around the table).

The intention of the gathering is stated explicitly in advance and at the beginning of each meeting, as are the shared understandings of how the group will interact with each other (the Agreements and Principles, explanation to

follow). A signal or gesture by the host invites the participants to shift from social space to council space, from casual to intentional interaction. The chime of a bell, a brief inspirational reading, or an important quotation may serve as a Start Point to initiate the proceedings (PeerSpirit). Ridge and Valley Charter School founders often began with a reference from the work of Thomas Berry or Brian Swimme, a reminder of the significance and relevance of the work ahead.

An important aspect of preparation is the physical setting, especially the center. Chairs are arranged in a circle, usually not around a table, but may have a low table or a cloth in the middle. A tangible center, with objects representing the shared intention of the group, offers a physical representation of the intangible community spirit, the willingness of the participants to focus on the common ground they will explore (PeerSpirit). The center may also hold flowers or branches, a candle, or other beautiful natural objects to rest the eyes and be refreshed. For example, in the early meetings of the founding trustees, a copy of the approved Ridge and Valley Charter School Charter Application outlining the plan for the school provided a focal point and reminder of the envisioned goal. Today, photos of students often remind the group to keep their needs foremost in discussion and decision-making. The center focal point also creates a transpersonal space, a place where different ideas and perspectives can exist as the group activates its collective wisdom. The center represents the intangible spirit that supports collaborative process, the synergy of the whole greater than the sum of its parts and of the group's aspiration being greater than any individual's. Particularly in times of tension or conflict, the center offers a

physical place for participants to rest their eyes, direct their energy, and remind them of their shared intention (PeerSpirit).

Check-In at the start of the meeting offers participants the opportunity to share a brief personal story, respond to a significant question, or otherwise explain their connection to the work at hand. People speak in turn to articulate their presence and participation, often with a talking piece, an object handed from one to the next symbolizing the attention of the group on the person speaking (Baldwin, *Circle Way* 23). A talking piece may be used effectively at any time to focus attention on one speaker, to slow heated discussion, and to solicit contributions from everyone.

Other "bones" supporting PeerSpirit circle process are the Agreements, Principles, and Practices. Explicitly describing how the group will interact offers the members security to participate in a free exchange of ideas, confirms respect for conflicting views, and describes the expectation of shared responsibility for the group process. Agreements may vary by group or meeting, but common ones include respect for confidentiality, a non-judgmental attitude of compassion and curiosity, and a commitment to each member's responsibility to express her needs and offer her service. In addition, an important agreement designates a volunteer guardian to pay attention to the group's energy and interaction and to signal a pause when conditions warrant or another member requests it (PeerSpirit). The guardian is a crucial part of the process, keeping track of intention and communication, slowing the conversation down when necessary. PeerSpirit meetings use a chime or other audible signal to indicate a pause by

ringing once to stop the action, waiting a short period in silence, then ringing again to end the pause, when the guardian or the participant who asked for the pause explains why. A seemingly simple practice, consciously acknowledging process and authorizing people to attend to and facilitate it can completely change the dynamic of a group. As the Ridge and Valley Charter School founders grappled with major issues, both practical and philosophical, the chime, pause, chime, allowed everyone to take a breath, collect their thoughts, acknowledge the difficulty at hand, and proceed with refreshed awareness and renewed focus. A common prompt for a pause is when conversation becomes heated and directed at individuals rather than to the group, represented by the center. The guardian helps rebalance energy and remind the group of their shared purpose.

The voluntary, rotating role of the guardian exemplifies the foundation of this methodology: the circle is an all-leader group. Shared leadership, rotating leadership, and individual responsibility to the group over a personal agenda are the three Principles characterizing circle practice, consciously institutionalizing non-hierarchical, collaborative process (Baldwin, *Circle Way* 27). Picture a group of children and adults interacting according to these guidelines, practicing shared leadership within the traditionally defined hierarchy of students and teachers; this is surely “school as unusual.” Students with this experience of interaction internalize a view of themselves as empowered and responsible, able to move in the world with confidence and compassion toward other children and adults. In

addition, the three Practices of PeerSpirit circling develop skills relevant to all relationships and particularly beneficial in groups:

> 1. To speak with intention: noting what has relevance to the conversation in the moment.
> 2. To listen with attention: respectful of the learning process for all members of the group.
> 3. To tend the well-being of the circle: remaining aware of the impact of our contributions. (PeerSpirit)

As noted, the ideas grounding the PeerSpirit governance methodology are simple and reasonable. Putting them into practice can be more challenging than it appears.

The remaining component, Check-Out, signals the conclusion of the meeting and offers each participant the opportunity to reflect briefly on the work of the group, his own reactions to the proceedings, and any action to follow. When all have spoken, there may be a closing comment, quote, poem, or moment of silence offered by the host, followed by a final chime, pause, chime to signal the close of council space and the return to social space (Baldwin, *Circle Way* 33). Rituals such as Check-In and Check-Out mark the circle as special, different, a place of heightened attention and participation, a period of concentrated exploration and cooperation. Though weekly founder and trustee meetings for Ridge and Valley often concluded well after midnight in the early years, Check-Out invariably included the members sharing their feelings of

satisfaction and commitment to the group, to the work completed, and to the effort still to come.

Drawing on the methodology developed by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, PeerSpirit, Inc. supported the founders in developing understanding of paradigm shift within existing organizations and institutions. Reflection on Baldwin and Linnea's work helped the simple "non-hierarchical" model evolve into more nuanced "collaborative, circle-based governance", acknowledging the realities of nested responsibilities and perspectives. Just as in the teacher-student relationship, there are inequalities of power and responsibility between school trustees and staff, students, and families. However, circle practice invites all to participate as peers in preparing for decisions and guiding the group. For example, in 2007 a group of seven- and eight-year-old students came to the RVCS trustees' formal action meeting. They joined the circle at the regular third-Thursday public meeting to advocate for preservation of the autumn olive plants on the school property. A non-native invasive species, the autumn olive had become the focus of a class festival and dear to their hearts. The children, accustomed to circle practice in their own class groups, Checked-In with the adults and later respectfully presented their prepared arguments for the species, taking turns to speak and offering different rationales, some based on data, some on emotion. They knew they would be listened to and their views considered. No matter the outcome, the experience of participating in a board of education meeting in this way enhanced their educational experience (Ridge and Valley Charter School, "Minutes" April 19, 2007)

Negotiating the complementary archetypes of circle (collaboration and equality) and triangle (hierarchical power structure, also represented among the earliest human symbols) requires acknowledgment and willingness to combine the strengths of each and to pursue balance in their functioning (Baldwin, *Circle Way* 12). The eight-year-old students knew a decision about the autumn olives was ultimately the responsibility of the adults entrusted with the care and development of the school's physical facility and responsible for the myriad interconnected implications of long-term planning, finances, land stewardship and maintenance, etc. They knew the choice was not theirs alone and relied on the circle for the space to introduce their perspectives into the decision-making process, recognizing that theirs was one among many the circle needed to encompass. Ignoring the reality of differing responsibilities and points of view—among trustees, staff, students, and families, for example—can lead to misapprehension of where final authority rests and frustration with perceived inequality.

Communicating the subtleties of these relationships of collaboration and responsibility is a challenge for groups operating within existing institutions. The legal responsibilities of boards of education and the conditions of the Open Public Meetings Act (the "Sunshine Law") are based on assumptions of hierarchical structure. Inevitably-competing interests add layers of complexity to circle process at Ridge and Valley Charter School. Despite the challenges, the founders and trustees are convinced the rewards of circle practice are worth the

continuing effort. The group remains committed to the process, having experienced the transformative power of circle individually and collectively.

In her 2005 dissertation, *Calling on Spirit: An Interpretive Ethnography of PeerSpirit Circles as Transformative Process*, Dr. Sarah MacDougall posits that the circle in PeerSpirit circle-based group dynamics is a "morphic field" (30), a space of potential for creating and inhabiting revolutionary changes in worldview and relationships, and that it can lead to physical actualization of personal and collective transformative experiences. She summarizes that

> When people sit in PeerSpirit circles as equals, relying on Spirit and one another, speaking intentionally, listening attentively, building interpersonal, energetic connections that create a sense of community, their capacity to envision and implement change is strengthened. (145)

This has been the experience of the Ridge and Valley Charter School founders. Traci Pannullo refers to one of many pre-opening meetings that concluded well after midnight:

> "Even though everyone was exhausted, there was a sense of determination and commitment. The steadfastness of our teamwork came about as a result of the group's circle work. It was personally transforming for me to experience people working together with such respect and integrity, even in the midst of incredible tension, deadlines, and occasional disagreements. The circle process continually brought us back to the purpose in the

> center—the pursuit of a common, higher goal." (qtd. In Baldwin, *Circle Way* 171)

The emerging "culture of conversation" is a social paradigm shift recognizing the empowerment of individuals to connect with each other, share what's in their minds and hearts, and to make things happen together. Baldwin and Linnea speculate that the much more complete story of human origins and history provided by contemporary science (empirical cosmology) may be helping people recognize the fundamental interconnection reflected in circle practice (*Circle Way* 13). Within a hierarchical, divisive tradition, apparent in the prevailing adversarial relationship of most New Jersey teachers and school boards, this is swimming against the current. It can be exhausting. Ridge and Valley founder Nanci Dvorsky reflects

> "We could not have sustained the group work through the early challenges if we had not had that foundational relationship piece that came from reading *Calling the Circle* and then having first Sarah [MacDougall] and then Sarah and Ann Linnea come and give us 'tune-ups' on circle practice. Each time we refocus on circle work, it strengthens what we are doing. It helps us on our own steep learning curve, coming out of our hierarchical training and expectation. And we are still circle novices." (qtd. in Baldwin, *Circle Way* 174).

Observers at RVCS trustee meetings remark on the openness, respect, and trust they sense, even when heated conflict arises.

MacDougall relates personal experiences in several circle gatherings, incorporating ethnographic research–notes from direct observation, survey responses, focus group transcripts, and participant narratives–to document co-participants' reactions. She describes how the circle structure challenges materialism, hierarchy, and isolated autonomy, and develops skills that enhance collaboration in all fields. She also examines some of the potential difficulties of circle practice, including "power and control, shadow and projection, marginal commitment to personal integrity and responsibility, fear of chaos and conflict, and lack of guidelines and/or training in group process" (62). In any ongoing group, these challenges inevitably appear; circle offers a container for holding conflict along with explicit means and tools for acknowledging and moving through it. However, groups consist of individuals with free will and self-determination and, without personal commitment and perseverance, it doesn't always work. Groups dissolve or individuals leave when such problems are not resolved.

Inequities of power and control, symbolized in the triangle shape of hierarchy, exist in society and emerge in groups (Roskelly 143). There are differences among people, from commanding physical or vocal presence to institutional or personal racism, sexism, ageism, and other forms of assumed privilege. These may be intentional or unconscious, aggressive or benign (Baldwin, *Understanding*). Whatever the source, inequities of power and control affect the group and the group must address them explicitly and determine procedures to ameliorate negative effects. Talking piece council, in which an

object passes from person to person and only the one holding it speaks (or is silent), is one method often used in circle to ensure all voices can be heard. The guardian of a PeerSpirit circle is particularly tasked to pay attention to balance among the participants' contributions and to encourage everyone to share their views, referring explicitly to the agreements when voices dominate or members monopolize the conversation (PeerSpirit). With rotating leadership, everyone serves as guardian in turn, which can heighten individuals' awareness of group dynamics at all times.

Just as power and control existing outside of a group come into the circle along with the members, shadow and projection also affect the collective interaction. Carl Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz originated the term "shadow" to refer to "the parts of ourselves that we have been unable to know" (qtd in Baldwin, *Circle Way* 128). Baldwin and Linnea define shadow in the circle context as "covert energy residing in the group–in other words, the undiscussables" (*Circle Way* 129). They offer questions to help bring these group shadows into the light:

> Are topics being avoided?
>
> What assumptions or behaviors are not addressed?
>
> What power issues are not explored?
>
> Who does not own their power, avoiding invitations to shine in the shared leadership of the group?
>
> How am I involved in these behaviors or reactions? (Baldwin, *Circle Way* 128)

Making shadow energy overt shifts awareness and influences the energy of the group. The structure of the circle, with explicitly-agreed norms, can make a supportive container for self- and group-reflection and respectful, honest communication when problems arise. ". . . [I]t brings us to each other and holds us together while we grow" (Baldwin, *Circle Way* 130). Baldwin and Linnea claim that the work of individuals and groups to deal with shadow leads to increased human consciousness, imperative to a just future for humans and other beings (Baldwin, *Circle Way* 130).

Shadow, the idea of an accepted and a forbidden self, may arise from coping strategies developed as children and unconsciously maintained as adults. For example, the chronic interrupter may claim "I'm from Brooklyn! That's just how we talk!" The person may feel defensive when others perceive that behavior as aggressive. Familiar with this style of energetic interaction with peers and family members in other settings, the speaker is likely unaware of how repeated interruptions can negatively influence the communication of other circle members and inhibit dialogue. Projected shadow assigns qualities in ourselves to others; transference projects unresolved issues from one person to an unrelated other (Baldwin, *Circle Way* 132). These shadows can appear as criticism, joking, compliments, body language, or facial expression and carry an energetic charge felt by the receiver that complicates the group's interaction and creates un-ease. Acknowledging shadow can be difficult, but reflection and self-reflection, avoiding shame or blame, with the company of supportive peers and in the container of

the circle structure, encourages the wholeness and compassion characteristic of shared leadership (MacDougall 76).

In addition to awareness and willingness to address shadow in the circle and in the self, PeerSpirit process requires commitment to a high level of personal integrity and responsibility. In any public school community, this is critical. School board members are volunteer public servants and examples in the communities they serve. In asking others—family members, students, staff, representatives of the New Jersey Department of Education—to behave differently, collaboratively, positively, with a shared vision of education for a hopeful sustainable future, the Ridge and Valley Charter School trustees commit to ongoing effort to model the self-reflection and awareness articulated by that vision. Many charter school trustees are parents of students in their schools, and Ridge and Valley is no exception, with a majority of parents among the trustees since the beginning (RVCS, *Annual Report 2011*).

The group frequently discusses the challenge of balancing the roles of trustee and parent. In a 2003 trustee professional development workshop, founder Dave McNulty explained "I feel I've accepted responsibility for *all* of the students, my children among them. This influences my ability to advocate for my own kids. . . . We have to ask constantly, 'How do we want an RVCS parent to act?' I'm that guy. We are that guy" (qtd in RVCS, "Notes" 4). Modeling the behavior expected in others presents challenges to the educational advocates of the trustee circle. If these people didn't care passionately about education, including their own children's education, they wouldn't volunteer as charter

school trustees. Individual trustees may be mentally able to separate their own roles of parent and school board member, but this is not possible for the staff and community. Difficult situations inevitably arise. Being able to refer to explicitly stated Agreements and rely on established shared Principles and Practices helps the group to address any problems in the context of the shared intention: in this situation, what's best for the health of the school? How can the mission values be best expressed in this situation? Relying on the wisdom of the group, embodied in the Center representing Spirit, the circle cultivates leadership from every chair and transforms the work of those who embrace it.

## Coda: Blairstown Library, 1:30 am

Blairstown Library Meeting Room. One-thirty in the morning on a Thursday, October 2003. A circle of folding chairs, a small group of people, a candle and a blank Ridge and Valley Charter School Student Application in the center. The library staff have long locked up and gone home; the rest of the building is dark, silent, and still. Papers shuffle, someone yawns, a chair squeaks as weight is shifted. Coffee gurgles from a thermos and the scented steam offers a sip of energy even to the decaffeinated.

The list of policies presented for first or second readings numbers in the dozens, yet those present go through them carefully, comment thoughtfully and make adjustments to reflect more closely the vision of the school-to-be. Despite

the late hour, they are all engaged. One relates her spouse's joking query about the illicit affair that keeps her out so late every Thursday; they chuckle at the incongruity of romantic rendezvous and drafting the School Policy Manual.

A single clear tone rises from a small chime, followed by a collective deep breath, a few sighs. Several people close their eyes, visibly relax. The silence is comfortable, companionable, soothing. After a few moments, the bell rings again. At the closing check-out, participants describe feeling energized by the effort of the evening. They comment on the satisfaction of pushing through the work together and their proud anticipation of the school to come. The room is restored, water bottles and candy wrappers collected. They pack up their papers, put on their coats, drift into the dark to warm up their cars and head for home, calling good night, exchanging hugs and handshakes. It is a kind of love affair.

## Chapter Five: Assessment

In New Jersey, the conceptual framework for charter schools suggests that the schools benefit from increased autonomy in exchange for increased accountability. The accountability is apparent. Charters are required to complete comprehensive annual reports in addition to the rigorous multi-faceted review that accompanies each five-year charter renewal application. Financial reports and minutes of board of trustee meetings are submitted monthly to the Department of Education at both the state and county levels, where they are closely monitored. Several charter schools have been closed in New Jersey over deficiencies in one or more of the three main areas of governance, finance, or academic performance as measured by results on selected standardized tests (Paik). A review of the annual School Report Cards of many New Jersey districts shows that traditional public schools with similar deficiencies in these areas have not been closed; charters are held to a rigorous standard and risk closure or non-renewal unlike their district counterparts.

This chapter reviews the annual assessment data for RVCS from 2005 through 2013, focusing in particular on 2011-12 and 2012-13, the only years in which the school did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress targets for academic

performance and therefore been subject to various external requirements for improvement. Since opening, RVCS has consistently met or exceeded all indicators for financial health and effectiveness of governance. The Department of Education Office of Charter Schools finance staff was satisfied with a "desk audit" of the school's finances for the 2013 renewal and declined to join the site visit for further review. The adoption of the Charter School Performance Framework in July 2012 signaled an important change in how NJ charter schools are evaluated, and set new targets for academic achievement in absolute performance, student growth (improvement over time by individual students), and performance relative to selected district schools. For Ridge and Valley Charter School, academic assessment based solely on standardized test performance assumes a very limited definition of academic performance. Measuring holistic education in two subject-based standardized tests contradicts the educational philosophy presented—and approved by the DOE—in the original charter application and subsequent renewals.

The Department of Education's one-size-fits-all model of assessment disregards what is for us the most important aspect of the original charter legislation: "to encourage the use of different and innovative learning methods" (State of New Jersey, *Charter*). A series of test sessions in two subjects once a year is inadequate to measure the multi-faceted RVCS learning experience and contrary to the school's focus on integrated, project-based experiential education. Lest concerns about test scores as sole assessment suggest sour grapes, the increases in Language Arts scores from 56% Proficient and Advanced Proficient

2011-12 to 76% in these categories in 2012-13 suggest that RVCS students are able to perform on these instruments as required (Dvorsky, Re: NJASK); the irony is that focus on test score improvement drains time and resources from more mission-related learning, the whole point of charter schools, and of Ridge and Valley in particular. All schools are about so much more than competent test-taking.

RVCS has always been an outlier, understandable for a school whose mission is to change the paradigm of human-earth relationships. No other New Jersey public school is trying to do that. The majority of the state's charters are "rescue schools," operating in troubled urban districts and serving students with a range of academic and social challenges. Many of these schools focus on academic achievement through traditional means, offering similar programs to district counterparts but with extended school days or years, high expectations for student and family behavior, and in-school support for out-of-school issues. For these schools, student retention, elementary and high school performance on the standardized tests, and college acceptance rates measure success. These factors can be easily tracked in comparison with non-charter schools in their neighborhoods (New Jersey Department of Education Office of Charter Schools, "New Jersey Charter Schools Annual Report"). These criteria are important at RVCS, too, but much less important than developing children's ability to learn independently, to self-regulate, to collaborate, and to contribute to their families and communities within a holistic, ecosystemic vision. Measuring and tracking success in these areas presents a different kind of challenge. RVCS continues

to seek means to demonstrate these less-tangible achievements in forms acceptable to its authorizers; paradigm shift has many implications, including the school's relationship with the Department of Education and their appreciation of authentic and relevant assessment.

The New Jersey School Report Card, developed in the early 1990s and a state requirement for all public schools since 1995, defines four main areas for data collection, listing school, district, District Factor Group (a comparison of schools in districts of similar demographic and socioeconomic status), state, and, in some instances, national results for each. The School Environment section reports the length of the school day and year, amount of instructional time per day, average class size, number of students on the waiting list for admission (for charter and vocational-technical schools only), number of classrooms, student/computer ratio, and Internet connectivity (State of New Jersey Department of Education, "New Jersey School Report Card"). Several assumptions are apparent in the indicators. An important one is that more is always better. More time in school, more students on the waiting list, more computers and Internet connectivity, it is implied, indicate higher quality educational programs. It is apparent even in these basic indicators that a set of values is being applied, whether or not they have been consciously determined and articulated. Additional categories of the Report Card offer measurements in other controversial areas, particularly the Student Performance Indicators, which rely exclusively on student results on standardized tests.

The Student Information section of the School Report Card lists enrollment by grade; percent of students with disabilities (the DOE term for students with Individualized Educational Programs [IEPs], *i.e.*, those with particular learning needs, confirmed through extensive testing, which require services from certified Special Education teachers, counselors, and/or therapists); student mobility rate (number of students who entered and left during the year); number of students with limited English proficiency; and language diversity among students (State of New Jersey Department of Education, "New Jersey School Report Card"). Staff Information notes Student/Administrator and Student/Faculty Ratio, Faculty Mobility and Attendance Rates, and Faculty and Administrator Credentials.

Assessment at Ridge and Valley has always been focused on individual students' ability to articulate and present their own learning in authentic forms; guides use rubrics with flexibility to accommodate students' unique pursuits. For example, study of the stream ecology on the school grounds may incorporate poetry as well as biology, history along with chemistry and an artifact to represent achievement in this study might be a group presentation of an original play about the stream, a song describing the elements in the water and how they contribute to its health, or a letter to the Director of the Division of Fish and Wildlife, New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, arguing for revisions to an existing endangered species policy (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Curriculum* 21). With dozens of such projects each year, it's apparent that extrapolating whole-school performance based on unique work by individual students requires significantly more effort than collating test scores from 30

children. As far as the authorizer is concerned, required NJASK testing remains the sole measure of performance in a school's academic achievement (New Jersey Department of Education Office of Charter Schools, "New Jersey Charter School Performance Framework").

Each year, a very small number of individual students at Ridge and Valley take each grade-level test, from eight to thirteen children per grade. With absences, make-up tests, and accommodations for the 31% of the school population designated with special learning needs, testing dominates school activities for more than four weeks each spring. The composite results vary within a small range year over year, and the performance of very few children can dramatically affect the percentages in such a small sample (New Jersey Department of Education, "School Improvement"). Other factors beyond the school's control also contribute to the test averages; for example, the number of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), whose learning needs presumably contribute to their test performance, went from 9 children in 2009-2010 to 21 students in 2010-2011 (State of New Jersey Department of Education, "New Jersey School Report Card"). Test preparation and performance have not been the highest priorities at RVCS for many reasons, including concerns about the validity and relevance of such "snapshot" glimpses of student achievement, opposition to bias in testing instruments, and objections to the premise of such testing altogether. Comparing Ridge and Valley Charter School scores for 2006 and 2011, for example, shows aggregate Pass rates (Proficient or Advanced Proficient) of 64% for each grade in Language Arts and a

change from 58% to 62% in Math, close to the state averages and slightly lower than local Blairstown Elementary, which has around 260 students and an 18% population of students with IEPs. Interestingly, 88% of Ridge and Valley eighth grade students achieved Proficient or Advanced Proficient scores in Science in 2006 and 100% of students did so in 2011 (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *Annual Report 2012*). Unfortunately for RVCS, the Science subject area test is not included in determining school performance.

Standardized testing is not foreign to RVCS, and guides acknowledge the value it can offer within a comprehensive assessment strategy. Internal standardized testing with nationally-normed instruments is used diagnostically to help direct student learning and identify specific areas needing attention; however, even these relatively low stakes tests present areas for attention. A simple example of the ongoing debate over testing accuracy and content comes from a middle school Language Arts teacher's account of giving the GRADE (Pearson Education's *Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation*, also used by RVCS) to her 11-year-old students. She had already described several questions with ambiguous pictures for the answers: "Question No. 6 referred to 'a pair of drumsticks' and included as choices a boy eating two chicken-type drumsticks along with others of the musical kind. This is almost funny, but the students are supposed to choose the 'right' answer" (qtd. in Strauss). In addition to the illogic or ambiguity of some test questions, the Ridge and Valley Charter School mindset can also complicate students' progress toward the "right" answer. For example, a guide noticed that eight out of ten 4$^{th}$

graders missed the same question on a particular standardized test. When she reviewed the question and its answer choices, it became apparent that RVCS students had determined the moon to be “near” the earth when the test’s correct answer categorized the moon as “far” from the earth. Based on the conceptual framework of the universe story, our nearest planetary neighbor is not far at all! But based on the testing company’s developers, it is, and the students got the answer wrong (Ridge and Valley Charter School, “Minutes”).

Prior to 2011-12, all of the annual assessments of RVCS indicated the school had met the DOE’s criteria for Adequate Yearly Progress. In each case, the data for test scores broken out by grade and subject noted that the number of test-takers was less than that required for a statistically relevant sample (New Jersey Department of Education, “Title I”). School staff continued to prioritize integrated learning and authentic assessments and relatively little attention was paid to NJASK results as an indicator of student or school success, even among guides with long experience in traditional NJ public school settings and presumably familiar with the importance of that measure. The 2011-12 School Report Card indicated for the first time that RVCS middle school students (specifically, the 13 8$^{th}$ grade students) did not meet the benchmark target for Adequate Yearly Progress (New Jersey Department of Education, “Title I”). With October 2012 the deadline for the school’s second Charter Renewal Application, it became clear that NJASK scores needed to become a priority.

It is important to note that New Jersey is scheduled to replace the current NJASK testing program with the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of

Readiness for College and Careers) Program in 2014-15. The online PARCC tests to replace the paper-and-#2-pencil NJASK are based on the national Common Core State Standards, adopted by New Jersey in 2010 (State of New Jersey Department of Education, "Common"). The Common Core State Standards focus on skills as well as knowledge, the process for solving the equation, for example, in addition to the correct answer. The experience of other Common Core states like New York suggests an initial drop in scores overall is likely in the first years of PARCC testing (Ujifusa); it is unclear how PARCC will affect the Charter School Performance Framework. Since implementation of PARCC requires all New Jersey students to be able to access the tests under specific conditions on computers of specific configuration, it's impossible to predict the outcome or actual timeline of the PARCC program, nor how it will affect the students, guides, and families of Ridge and Valley.

In July 2012, the Office of Charter Schools of the NJ Department of Education adopted a Performance Framework prepared by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. The now-required Charter Agreement states that

> the Performance Framework shall supersede and replace any and all assessment measures, educational goals and objectives, financial operations metrics, and organizational performance metrics set forth in the Application and not explicitly incorporated into the Performance Framework. The specific terms, form and requirements of the Performance Framework, including any

> required indicators, measures, metrics, and targets, are maintained and disseminated by the Authorizer and will be binding on the School. (New Jersey Department of Education Office of Charter Schools, “Performance”)

In one paragraph, the Agreement replaces the unique Charter Applications of all 87 existing charter schools in the state and has the effect of undermining the New Jersey Charter School Program legislation. The Agreement’s and Framework’s requirements also reveal some assumptions about charter schools vis–à–vis their non-charter counterparts.

The Academic Performance section of the Charter School Performance Framework includes three indicators for elementary schools scores for 4th and 8th grade NJASK tests in Language Arts and Math: Absolute Student Achievement, Comparative Performance, and Student Progress Over Time (Growth) (New Jersey Department of Education Office of Charter Schools, “Performance”). The requirement for Absolute Student Achievement requires that 75% of all 4th and 8th grade students score Proficient or Advanced Proficient in Language Arts and Math, with 20 – 29% Advanced Proficient. The 75% target includes students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), a significant 31% of the RVCS population. In 2012, only 52% of Ridge and Valley test-takers met this criterion in Language Arts and 63% in Math, with 0% Advanced Proficient in Language Arts and 23% Advanced Proficient in Math, resulting in a one-year academic probation. However, the 2013 scores show 76% scored Proficient or Advanced Proficient in Language Arts, 66% in Math. The 24% increase in Language Arts at RVCS is

credited to students spending about 40 minutes each week devoted specifically to test preparation (including multiple-choice test-taking skills) and to guides consistently drawing students' attention to the connections between the everyday integrated curriculum and the subject-specific standardized tests and potential test questions. Similar focus is being applied in Math in preparation for the 2014 NJASK. Despite the academic probation, the scores are within the performance target ranges for 2012 under the ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, i.e., No Child Left Behind) Waiver – Annual Progress Targets (New Jersey Department of Education, "ESEA"), and were achieved without significantly modifying the school's educational program. The Office of Charter Schools has not provided a specific timeframe for meeting the Performance Framework criteria, but a decision regarding the one-year academic probation is due at the end of February 2014.

The Comparative Performance indicators of the Framework offer a challenging set of goals, particularly for Ridge and Valley. For the statewide NJ School Performance Reports, a Peer Group of schools from across the state is selected for each charter and non-charter school, supposedly similar in grade configuration and the demographic indicators of enrollment in the Free and Reduced Price Lunch program (an indirect economic measure), Limited English Proficiency programs, and Special Education programs. The Peer Group for RVCS includes no other charter schools, and only one school from Northwest New Jersey. None of the schools in the region of residence for Ridge and Valley are included, nor are any of the 26 sending districts (districts of residence) of

current RVCS students. The grade configurations include schools that are Pre-K to 8th, 4th through 8th, 6th through 8th, and 7th through 8th, with only one other K-8th grade school. Participation in the Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program is 0% at Ridge and Valley and the majority of the other schools in the group to a peak of 1.5% at one of the thirty schools; students with Limited English Proficiency are similarly represented. The percentage of students classified as Special Education students is the most interesting point of comparison; Ridge and Valley Charter School's 2011 population of 25% special education students is significantly higher than the next-highest 15.9%, with most of the peer schools in the 12 – 15% range (New Jersey Department of Education, "Title I"). Based on the comparison with the other schools of this group, RVCS "lags" or "significantly lags" in academic achievement (NJASK scores), college and career readiness (measured by the number of students taking Algebra and the level of chronic absenteeism), and student growth (NJASK score progress from grades 4 through 8 compared to students with similar NJASK score history). The high achievement of RVCS graduates in high school and college—Honors classes, AP classes, Honor Roll, admission to competitive programs and institutions, etc. —suggest these measures are not necessarily reliable predictors of student (or school) success (Fairtest, "Test Scores Do Not Equal Merit").

The Charter School Performance Framework designates the district-of-residence rather than the DOE Peer Group as the basis for assessing comparative performance and requires charters to perform 10 – 19% better than their local peers. A look at the indicators for just one of the schools in the North

Warren Regional High School region of residence (RVCS' region of residence), which is comprised of a high school, middle school, and three elementary schools, highlights some problems with this measurement. The school closest in size and nearest geographically to Ridge and Valley Charter School is the pre-K through 6th grade Frelinghuysen Elementary School in Frelinghuysen Township. Of the 166 students, 15% are classified as Special Education students, with 0% Free and Reduced Lunch, 0% Limited English Proficiency. In 2012, 31% of Ridge and Valley's 124 students have Special Education accommodations, 0% Free and Reduced Lunch, 0% Limited English Proficiency. Because Frelinghuysen is pre-kindergarten through 6th grade, 7th and 8th grade test-takers are not included in their aggregate, though they are in Ridge and Valley's. The township school is justifiably proud of its NJASK performance: 88% of students scored in the Proficient or Advanced Proficient range in Language Arts (23% Advanced Proficient) and 98% in Math (with 72% Advanced Proficient) (New Jersey Department of Education, "Title I").

The simple mathematical impossibility of performing 10 – 19% better than this one school in the RVCS district-of-residence is apparent. The Comparative Performance metric of the Framework highlights the challenge of charter schools in high-achieving districts under the one-size-fits-all assessment based on test scores. The Performance Framework may fit better for charter schools in failing districts whose programs focus on traditional academic achievement as measured by standardized tests rather than for charter schools pursuing true

educational alternatives. Nevertheless, the Framework is now the basis of assessment for all charter schools.

The Student Growth Percentile (SGP) Indicators on the NJ School Performance Report calculate "how students progressed in grades 4 through 8 in NJASK Language Arts Literacy and Math when compared to other students with a similar NJASK test score history" (New Jersey Department of Education, "Title I"); the methodology to determine this is so complex, a link to a video explaining it is included in each school's report. For RVCS in 2012, the Student Growth Percentile target in both Language Arts and Math was 35. RVCS achieved an SGP of 29 in Language Arts, not meeting the target, and 55 in Math, exceeding it (New Jersey Department of Education, "Title I"). It will be interesting to see how the increase in Language Arts scores from 2012 to 2013 is reflected in 2013's SGP.

In summary, the Charter School Performance Framework has many implications and some questionable assumptions. Fundamentally, it assumes that performance on the 4$^{th}$ and 8$^{th}$ grade standardized tests is an accurate representation of a student's and school's achievement, an assumption that can be challenged on many levels including appropriateness of standardized testing *at all*, appropriateness of standardized testing in specific educational programs, and problems with the tests themselves, including test bias. In addition, the Framework's one-size-fits-all standard burdens charters to out-score local schools, even in the highest-performing districts where this is mathematically impossible. For a school like Ridge and Valley, the score on a mandatory annual

standardized test is one measure of student and school achievement among many. While the snapshot these indicators offer provides helpful additional data for decision-making, and external motivation for teachers, students, and families, the limitations of the measurement are apparent. Ridge and Valley Charter School's ongoing challenge is to identify and implement additional and alternative assessment tools that more closely reflect the school's specific goals and values while satisfying the expectations of the Department of Education for objective, data-driven assessment.

## Alternative Assessments

In addition to the Performance Framework benchmarks determined by the Department of Education, alternative assessment instruments are relevant to RVCS. The *Quality Standards for Charter Schools* in development by the New Jersey Charter Schools Association describes the conceptual vision expressed in a school's approved charter within five Standards accompanied by as many as nine corresponding foci, objectives, and evidence sets for each (Pressler). Much like the Annual Report and renewal application requirements by the NJDOE, the Quality Standards ask schools to determine and collect data to demonstrate success in transforming the founding vision to daily reality.

In addition to performance on standardized tests in the Student Achievement section, for example, recommended evidence includes individual teachers' lesson plans and reports on in-class observations of instructional practice related to "academic" and "non-academic" achievement. "Fidelity to

Mission" might be indicated with records of graduation rate, or acceptance to secondary school or college; "Effectiveness of Educational Management and Leadership" may be reflected in parent and staff survey results and in copies of regular school communications via website or newsletter (Pressler). Like the processes required by the New Jersey Department of Education, the Charter School Association Quality Standards rely on fundamental fiscal health and legal compliance with "all pertinent laws and regulations, especially those related to transparency and spending" (Pressler) as the basis for all school activities. Identifying indicators for each of these standards in support of the 2012 Application for Charter Renewal allowed RVCS to highlight achievements in many areas in addition to performance on standardized tests and remains an ongoing effort.

The assessments presented by the New Jersey Department of Education, sole authorizer of the state's charter schools, may be applied to any New Jersey charter school and form the foundation for any charter school's continued existence. Of course, a school must perform acceptably on its authorizers' measures to remain in operation. Beyond the standard requirements, however, RVCS and other charter schools are challenged to assess the unique and innovative aspects of their programs and report on them to the satisfaction of its authorizer. An unconventional school must collect and report relevant, comprehensible data in support of mission-related goals, both "academic" and "non-academic" to a decidedly conventional, conservative, and often resistant audience.

The “Understanding By Design” approach pioneered by Dr. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe with the support of the Dodge Foundation offers an important piece to the Ridge and Valley Charter School assessment process. Also termed “backwards design”, this model “delays the planning of classroom activities until goals have been clarified and assessments designed”, stressing the importance of collaboration among teachers and between teachers and students in determining goals, outcomes, and assessments (Authentic). Transferring the concept to institutional assessment, this method asks school leaders to start by describing what success looks like. As presented in the Dodge Foundation Assessment Initiative, a professional development workshop specifically for non-profit organizations like RVCS who have received grant support from Dodge, Understanding By Design means organizations begin by asking, “What will it look like when we get it right?” (Grant). Once these parameters have been determined, criteria for achievement at different levels are described by the group, leading to indicators of progress and attainment. An early RVCS community education effort combined circle process, World Café-style communication practice, and Understanding By Design concepts to create the RVCS “Portrait of a Graduate,” a community vision of the results of an RVCS education (see Appendix).

Wiggins and Tighe’s concept of backwards design entails describing the desired outcome first, then seeking indicators that will allow for measurement. Though Ridge and Valley Charter School is unique in combining elements of ecological literacy, sustainability, non-hierarchical collaborative governance,

differentiated instruction, and outdoor experiential education, many reputable individuals and organizations have developed review processes for these multiple facets.

To reflect on ecological literacy, the State Education and the Environment Roundtable (SEER) offers a Self-Evaluation Guide for using the Environment as Integrating Context for Learning (EIC), as recommended in the report *Closing the Achievement Gap: Using the Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning* by Gerald Lieberman and Linda Hoody (State Education and Environment Roundtable, "Self-"). Development in sustainability may be gauged with The Cloud Institute's "Education for Sustainability Reality Check," a comprehensive tool for reviewing everything from Physical Plant, Procurement, and Investments, to Individual and Community Learning Habits (Cloud). Deirdre Bucciarelli of the Center for Partnership Studies provides the "Partnership Education Self-Assessment Survey" in the book *Partnership Education in Action* (Bucciarelli 385-391) to examine mutually-enhancing relationships and attitudes promoting collaboration. The narrative describing an "All Kinds of Minds" school in *All Kinds of Minds: A Young Student's Book About Learning Abilities and Learning Disorders* offers Dr. Mel Levine's model of differentiated instruction, and the *Manual of Accreditation Standards for Adventure, Experiential, and Therapeutic Adventure Programs, 5th edition* incorporates criteria for effective outdoor experiential education programs (Association for Experiential). Incorporating aspects of these tools in combination with the assessments required by the NJDOE and recommended by the Charter Schools Association provides a more

comprehensive examination of Ridge and Valley Charter School's progress toward its founding vision.

In fall of 2013, RVCS conducted surveys of current students and alumni for the school's information and as part of the academic probation remediation process, with the encouragement of the Office of Charter Schools staff. The intention of the surveys was to follow up with graduates as they move into high school and college, and to explore and illuminate some of the mission-specific impacts of an RVCS education not easily represented in standardized testing programs. Data from these instruments, as well as from the NJ ASK and other assessments, informs development of the educational program.

Trustee Tom Kelleher and Curriculum Coordinator Traci Pannullo researched a number of existing surveys and associations that could assist in devising a custom survey. Ultimately, we chose the Gallup Student Poll for our current students, and created an original electronic RVCS Alumni Survey to poll our graduates. The Gallup poll for 5$^{th}$ through 12$^{th}$ graders was not designed for our mission but its emphasis is on students' hope, engagement, and well-being, which Gallup confirms are scientifically validated predictors of later success (Gallup). It is also a third-party, non-biased tool with comparisons to non-RVCS students. The RVCS Alumni Survey is mission-specific, and includes standard metrics of self-reported high school academic performance as well as questions related to the educational experience RVCS intends to offer. At present it lacks comparison to non-RVCS students. Excerpts from the survey results were

shared with the RVCS guides and submitted to the Office of Charter Schools in January 2014 in connection to the academic probation.

The Gallup Student Poll is designed to collect data on the hope, engagement, and wellbeing of American 5th to 12th grade public school students. Offered free in October each year, the poll

> supplies teachers, administrators and community leaders with actionable and malleable data related to other key achievement measures. Hope, engagement, and wellbeing results fill the data void, helping schools, districts, and community leaders to build more effective, holistic strategies aimed at student success. (Gallup)

RVCS 5th through 8th graders took the national poll in 2013. Initial results suggest the Ridge and Valley students placed in the top 25% of respondents in these qualities, and well above the national average in response to questions like "Did you learn or do something interesting yesterday?" and "My school is committed to building the strengths of each student" (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *2013*). Further review of the data may inform development of the educational program and indicate areas for closer examination.

The 2013 RVCS Alumni Survey was distributed electronically in November to the 50 alumni for whom we have current contact information. Thirty-six students responded, for an impressive response rate of 72% of those invited. There are 83 surviving alumni, so even including those we weren't able to contact, the response represents 42% of total RVCS alumni. Of the 36 respondents, 75% (27

of 36 alumni) are either attending or planning on attending a 4 year college, 77% (28 of 36 alumni) are in honors or Advanced Placement classes, 77% (28 of 36 alumni) are or have been on Honor Roll in high school, and 41% (15 of 36 alumni) are planning on attending graduate school (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *2013*). A set of statements with a Likert scale of Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree indicate more than 75% of respondents agree or strongly agree that RVCS "was a good school experience for me," and prepared students for success in education, self-motivation, critical thinking, collaboration, and positive interaction with adults (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *2013*). Similar percentages were represented in the responses to "I think of the natural world as a community to which I belong" and "I have done something exceptional for my age."

The comments section included many observations relevant to the mission components. Mutually-enhancing relationships and circle practice were mentioned by several alumni, and many referenced their post-RVCS community service. The benefits of outdoor, experiential education were repeatedly noted: "RVCS showed me to really love the earth! I'm pretty 'indoorsy', but RVCS got me outside a lot and I loved it. I appreciate nature much more than I did before RVCS" and "I really appreciated being able to leave the classroom on a daily basis to move around and explore the outdoors. The hands-on learning approach really helped me to find purpose and meaning in what I was learning" (Ridge and Valley Charter School, *2013*).

Students describe themselves as lifelong learners and express pride in their ability to initiate and complete individual educational projects. Review of the Alumni Survey responses in detail may also contribute to development of the educational program. The Survey can be used annually to maintain contact with alumni and track responses over time.

Alternative assessments in addition to standardized test scores are certainly relevant to Ridge and Valley Charter School. The task of assessing RVCS within the limited parameters of the NJ Department of Education mindset and imagination is work in addition to the existing efforts at changing the world, being good people, loving children and each other, running a school, and resisting the pressure from the educational bureaucracy and the world at large to conform to an outdated story of hierarchy and convention. The academic probation highlights RVCS' ongoing challenges, though its resolution offers some cause for optimism. In a March 11, 2014 letter from the NJDOE, Chief Innovation Officer Evo Popoff congratulated RVCS on successfully responding to the probation, expressing "confidence that [the school] is on the trajectory towards providing a high-quality education to its students" (Popoff 1). Though it is important to note that the data referred to in the letter is exclusively standardized test scores from 2008 through 2013, the probationary status was removed.

The scores from the April 2014 NJASK will be released in August and will need to show improvement in the Math results based on the Performance Framework to satisfy the Department of Education. Remaining a public charter school under the auspices of the NJDOE, RVCS will always risk failure on the

Department's limited and sometimes arbitrary terms. We know from experience that support and resources for charter schools at the state level ebbs and flows and that political shifts significantly impact all aspects of education. One hopeful alternative scenario is that working with RVCS helps the institution of the NJDOE evolve in their assessment of schools and programs, and grow to appreciate a wider range of instruments to evaluate educational innovation. RVCS operating independently of the NJDOE presents the significant challenges of funding the school while maintaining access for all children.

A voucher program that includes private or independent schools could be an option in the future, though New Jersey does not presently have such a plan and the concept remains controversial. Private benefactors with the necessary resources have yet to appear, despite concerted effort to reach out to philanthropists and foundations with like-minded missions. The trustees will certainly consider all possibilities as events unfold, as we always have. We'll continue to rely on circle to pool our wisdom to find the best course of action as circumstances evolve.

No matter the decision of the Department of Education regarding Ridge and Valley's academic success this spring, next spring, or in years to come, the school has demonstrated significant achievement in realizing its founding vision of paradigm shift in public education. With the power of circle practice and the passion and dedication of committed individuals, Ridge and Valley Charter School impacts the lives of the children and adults of our community. RVCS families, students, guides, and graduates appreciate the important aspects of the

vision articulated by the founders: mutually-enhancing relationships, outdoor learning, and experiential, integrated, differentiated education. Education for a hopeful sustainable future is alive at Ridge and Valley Charter School, one expression of the Great Work of "reinventing the human . . . at the species level . . . with critical reflection . . . within the community of life systems . . . in a time-developmental context . . . by means of story and shared dream experience" (Berry, *Great Work* 168). This is truly paradigm shift in public education.

## Conclusion

The Ridge and Valley Charter School story illustrates challenges and rewards of pursuing paradigm shift in public elementary education. Motivated by concern over the impact of human behavior on the planetary ecosystem and inspired by a worldview of mutually-enhancing relationships, a small group of community volunteers articulated a vision of education for a hopeful sustainable future. The New Jersey Charter School Program, which promotes innovation in public education, provided the means to pursue and develop that vision in the context of a chartered public elementary school. Ridge and Valley Charter School opened in 2004 in temporary facilities in Blairstown, New Jersey, with eight staff and 75 children. In 2014, after two charter renewals, twenty-one faculty members support more than 125 children in an experiential, outdoor curriculum on the school's 17+-acre campus. There are 85 alumni, many of whom reflect positively on their RVCS experience in interviews, surveys, and focus groups for this study.

Collaborative, non-hierarchical governance based on PeerSpirit circle practice developed by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea is a fundamental aspect of the school's mission; founding trustees assert that without it there would be no school. Circle practice continues to be used at Ridge and Valley in class groups

of students and teachers, among the staff, and on the board of trustees. The Principles and Agreements of PeerSpirit process supported the school and its trustees through the founding period and many subsequent challenges, including funding, facility, and personnel and continue to guide the evolution of the school.

The New Jersey Department of Education, the school's authorizer, holds charter schools accountable through rigorous regular assessment. From 2005 to 2012, RVCS met the Department's criteria for fiscal health, effective governance, and academic progress, though the number of children annually taking the required standardized tests in Math and Language Arts used to measure academic progress were too few to be statistically significant. In 2012, new Performance Standards for charter schools were adopted which further intensified the focus on student test scores. The Framework requires charter schools to outperform their non-charter counterparts by 10 – 19% on results from the annual 4$^{th}$ and 8$^{th}$ grade Math and Language Arts tests. Based on this standard, Ridge and Valley Charter School received a one-year academic probation in February 2013 and initiated a remediation plan.

Results from spring 2013 testing show improvement in the school's Language Arts performance to an acceptable 76% Proficient or Advanced Proficient, with Math scores rising slightly to 66% Proficient or Advanced Proficient. Without compromising core beliefs about children, learning, and assessment, RVCS guides incorporate preparation for the state-mandated assessments into their curricula and support students' and families' understanding of the significance of the tests in the context of the Department of

Education's assessment of the school. New Jersey's adoption of the national Common Core curriculum standards and introduction of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) testing program scheduled for 2015 present new parameters which will require adjustment of the Performance Framework, its benchmarks, and the school's response.

An assumption that charter schools are intended to be "rescue" schools in failing urban districts is apparent in the Performance Standards. In Ridge and Valley's rural district of residence, local schools' scores on the standardized tests make it mathematically impossible for RVCS to outperform them by the required percentage. This fact, and the belief that standardized testing provides a very limited picture of students' academic achievement, leads Ridge and Valley to explore alternative assessments that can present a broader picture of student development and meet the Department of Education's standards of reliability and relevance.

One measure of achievement for elementary school graduates is their ability to succeed in secondary and post-secondary education. Through interviews, focus groups, and surveys, the school has amassed data on alumni high school attendance and graduation, acceptance to competitive programs, and selection for Honor Roll and Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes, among other indicators. Initial analysis suggests that Ridge and Valley contributed to the success of graduates' subsequent school experiences. In addition, responses from alumni indicate appreciation for the school's less-conventional achievements, with graduates consistently reporting self-

confidence, self-direction, and self-motivation, initiative, adaptability, ease with adults and children of various ages, appreciation for the natural world, and the ability to learn independently. A representative comment observes, “I think RVCS’s concept of experiential education taught me how to learn, and also how to use what I learn. It put the rest of my education into perspective.”

Ridge and Valley Charter School continues to evolve. Transitions in staff and leadership have not diluted the commitment to a vision of alternative public education based on ecological literacy and sustainability. Non-hierarchical circle governance continues to challenge conventional assumptions about educational bureaucracy, leadership, and responsibility and provide structure for collaborative group effort. Despite challenges of assessing alternative practice with conventional instruments, data shows progress toward the school’s goals, both “academic” and “non-academic,” a distinction employed by the Department of Education. Information from multiple sources indicates that Ridge and Valley Charter School is progressing toward its vision of education for a hopeful sustainable future and impacting the lives of its students. By promoting fundamental change—paradigm shift in public education—RVCS demonstrates educational innovation and exemplifies the intention of the New Jersey Charter School Program Act of 1995:

> to improve pupil learning; increase for students and parents the educational choices available when selecting the learning environment which they feel may be the most appropriate; encourage the use of different and innovative learning methods;

> establish a new form of accountability for schools; require the measurement of learning outcomes; make the school the unit for educational improvement; and establish new professional opportunities for teachers. (State of New Jersey, *Charter School Program Act of 1995*)

Assessment of Ridge and Valley Charter School demonstrates a challenge faced by the New Jersey Department of Education and charter school authorizers in other states: to create a system that holds schools accountable while recognizing, supporting, and celebrating the unique achievements of innovative practices. Particularly in relation to charter schools, one size cannot fit all. Scholars and practitioners in the field readily acknowledge individual learning styles and needs in students, yet educational institutions such as the Department of Education paradoxically apply uniform assessment to the schools that serve these unique pupils.

No matter the Department of Education's assessment of RVCS, the school's founding and first ten years of operation exemplify the intention of New Jersey's Charter School Program Act and of the potential inherent in a group of individuals committed to a shared vision. As founder Dave McNulty reflects,

> RVCS created a model—no school like this existed before. Now it does, and it's beautiful. It's an act of love and beauty unto itself. And it just came from a group of people, just us. There are imperfections, sure—you don't always get the beauty you were expecting! But it was just regular folks who did it, civilians taking on

> a role of caretaker of their society, outside of government or other structures. We have to understand this: that's all we have anyway, just "us"-es. We're all "us"-es.

The RVCS story illustrates what can happen when people choose to challenge assumptions and work together in a different way. Commitment to mutually-enhancing relationships with each other and with the planetary ecosystem profoundly affects human decisions and actions. Ecological evidence suggests that no matter what form they take or process they follow, institutions based on this commitment must be at the foundation of a hopeful sustainable future. By pursuing paradigm shift in public education, Ridge and Valley Charter School is one example of how such a future can unfold.

# Appendix

## A: Ridge and Valley Charter School Mission and Vision

(from the school's brochure and website)

Children are born with an immense potential. Their innate curiosity and fascination with the world around them is the fundamental basis of their human search for meaning, purpose, love, satisfaction and community.

Ridge and Valley Charter School is committed to developing this immense potential. By encouraging our children's relationships to home, family, school, town, region, nature, Earth and universe, all life becomes the context for their learning.

Our school encourages children to wonder, to think, to discover and to question. They are cherished and respected and learn to do the same with the world around them.

Ridge and Valley Charter School believes that it is possible to create a more ecologically sustainable future and that our children have a right to a planet of pure air, clean water, a vibrant natural world and a more just and equitable human community.

This vision is not only a right but a possibility. We believe it is the purpose of a democratic society to lay the foundation of such a future.

**B: Portrait of a Ridge and Valley Charter School Graduate**

(developed collaboratively by the community, initiated in a circle process workshop in 2006)

A future graduate of the Ridge and Valley Charter School will be:

One who has a confident, yet well-balanced, sense of self

One who exhibits a healthful, personal life style

One who has adopted the skills of a lifetime learner through his/her ability to observe, listen, read, research, experiment, evaluate, and effectively communicate

One who can translate her/his academic foundations into a template for future life experience

One who exhibits open receptivity to multi-cultural attitudes, perceptions, values, and beliefs

One who is adaptable and positively and constructively responsive to change

One who is not inhibited in showing expressions of wonder, passion, and compassion for life elements worthy of such expression

One who conveys optimism, ambition, and the potential of possibilities in the world around him/her

One who exhibits the courage and confidence to question and challenge when skepticism is warranted

One who is a holistic, systemic, and critical thinker with the tools and confidence to face problems and seek their solutions

One who is imbued with creativity and unique powers of expression

One who exercises the capacity for hard work, determination, and the pursuit of goals

One who is socially responsible, with finely-tuned human relational skills

One who is adept at participating in group collaboration, consensus, and conflict resolution

One who demonstrates actions that reflect a true and sustainable sense of community

One who is imbued with a powerful sense of place and an innate environmental sensitivity

One who exhibits an understanding of ecological relationships, a comprehension of human ecological impacts, and the need for environmental sustainability

One who is steadfastly committed to her/his role in contributing to improvement of the quality of life of the environment and world around her/him

## C: Human Research Protocols and Forms

# RIDGE AND VALLEY CHARTER SCHOOL: THE FIRST TEN YEARS

# ASSENT FORM: MINOR

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

**You are invited to be a participant in a research study about the first ten years of Ridge and Valley Charter School, from its founding in 2000 through 2010, its sixth year. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a graduate age 17 or under. We ask that you read this explanation and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. The study is being conducted by Carol M. (Kerry) Barnett, doctoral student in the Arts and Letters program of the Casperson School of Graduate Studies, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.**

**2. BACKGROUND**

**The purpose of this study is to review the important ideas Ridge and Valley Charter School is based on and how they appeared in the school during the first ten years of operation. No research has been conducted specifically on RVCS yet, though studies have been completed on New Jersey's Charter School program and on the use of collaboration in businesses and organizations.**

**3. DURATION**

**The length of time you will be involved with this study is one 75-minute group interview, conducted in person between November 1, 2011 and May 30, 2012. Specific dates and times are indicated in the accompanying invitation letter. Participants age 17 and under will participate in group interviews with other RVCS graduates only.**

**4. PROCEDURES**

**If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you and your parent or legal guardian to do the following things: 1) Agree on a time and place for the group interview. 2) Provide your own transportation to the scheduled interview. 3) Before the interview, review with Ms. Barnett the summary of the project; the specific details of the interview, including the questions that will be asked; that you may choose at any time to answer or not, to skip any questions, or to end your part in the interview; the concept of Assent and Parental/Legal Guardian Consent; and the potential risks and benefits of being in the study. 4) Ask any questions about the research before giving consent to participate. 5) Graduate: Sign a copy of this Assent Form: Minor**

**and Parent/Legal Guardian sign a copy of the Parental/Legal Guardian Consent Form: Minor. In the study, a number will be assigned to you to identify your interview responses and protect your privacy. 6) In the interview, graduates respond to the questions provided in advance about your experiences with Ridge and Valley Charter School, listen to other participants' responses, and participate in any group discussion that follows. You will be asked to remember your experiences with Ridge and Valley Charter School, talk about the school's effect on you, and share stories about RVCS if you want to. The interviews will be recorded. If you do not agree to have your interview recorded, you may not be in the study. Graduates age 17 and under are invited to participate only in group interviews of three or more participants. You are not required to answer all of the questions and you may end your interview at any time without consequence or penalty. You will have an opportunity to see the results of the research.**

**5. RISKS/BENEFITS**

**This study has the following risks: For some participants, some memories of Ridge and Valley Charter School may be uncomfortable or painful to recall. Every effort will be made to provide a comfortable, empathetic research atmosphere. Your name will not be attached to your responses, only an assigned number. You may choose what you want to say and may choose not to answer any question.**

**The benefits of participation are: contributing to knowledge of New Jersey public charter schools through telling the story of one school's beginning. You also may enjoy sharing the story of your experience of RVCS and discussing the school with other graduates. Light refreshments will be served at the interview.**

**6. CONFIDENTIALITY**

**Ms. Barnett will keep the recordings of the interviews and written notes about them safe. No one else will be able to listen to or read them. Your privacy will be protected by using an assigned number for each participant instead of your name. General labels (for example, "graduate") and summaries of group responses will be used wherever possible. When the results of the research are published in dissertation form, no names of participants age 17 or under will be used and no information that would make it possible to identify you will be included.**

**7. VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY**

**Your decision whether or not to participate in this research will not affect your current or future relations with Drew University or Ridge and Valley Charter School. If you decide to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships and without penalty.**

**8. CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

**A Debriefing Form will be provided to you on completion of the interview(s). The Form explains the purpose and methods of this research and provides contact information for the researcher and responsible faculty advisor.**

**The researcher conducting this study is Carol M. (Kerry) Barnett. You and/or your legal guardian may ask any questions you have right now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher at barnettc@centenarycollege.edu or (908) 362-7244.**

**If you have questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, you may contact her advisor Dr. William Rogers, wrogers@drew.edu, telephone (973) 408-3285. If you have questions about the study but want to talk to someone else who is not connected to the study, you can call the Drew University Institutional Review Board (IRB) in care of Ms. Lois Levy, Adjunct Instructor in the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies at (973) 408-3000.**

**9. STATEMENT OF ASSENT**

**The procedures of this study have been explained to me and my and my legal guardian's questions have been addressed. I understand that the interview will be recorded and that if I do not wish to be recorded I may not participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. If I have any concerns about my experience in this study (e.g., that I was treated unfairly or felt unnecessarily threatened), I or my legal guardian may contact the Chair of the Drew Institutional Review Board regarding my concerns.**

**Participant age 17 or younger signature_____**

**Participant age 17 or younger printed name_____**

**Date_____**

# RIDGE AND VALLEY CHARTER SCHOOL: THE FIRST TEN YEARS

## PARENTAL/LEGAL GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM: MINOR

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

**Your child is invited to be a participant in a research study about the first ten years of Ridge and Valley Charter School, from its founding in 2000 through 2010, its sixth year. Your child was selected as a possible participant because she or he is a graduate age 17 or under. We ask that you read this explanation and ask any questions you may have before agreeing for your child to be in the study. The study is being conducted by Carol M. (Kerry) Barnett, doctoral student in the Arts and Letters program of the Casperson School of Graduate Studies, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.**

**2. BACKGROUND**

**The purpose of this study is to review the important ideas Ridge and Valley Charter School is based on and how they appeared in the school during the first ten years of operation. No research has been conducted specifically on RVCS yet, though studies have been completed on New Jersey's Charter School program and on the use of collaboration in businesses and organizations.**

**3. DURATION**

**The length of time your child will be involved with this study is one 75-minute group interview, conducted in person between November 1, 2011 and May 30, 2012. At the same time, you will be asked to join the first 15 minutes of the session in order to review the details, ask questions, and give your consent. Specific dates and times are indicated in the accompanying invitation letter. Participants age 17 and under will participate in group interviews with other RVCS graduates only.**

**4. PROCEDURES**

**If you agree for your child to be in this study, we will ask you and your child to do the following things: 1) Agree on a time and place for the group interview. 2) Provide your own transportation to the scheduled interview. 3) Before the interview, review with Ms. Barnett the summary of the project; the specific details of the interview, including the questions that will be asked; that your child may choose at any time to answer or not, to skip any questions, or to end the child's part in the interview; the concept of Assent and Parental/Legal Guardian Consent; and the potential risks and benefits of being in the study. 4) Ask any questions about the research before giving consent to participate. 5) Graduate: Sign a copy of this**

**Assent Form: Minor and Parent/Legal Guardian sign a copy of the Parental/Legal Guardian Consent Form: Minor. In the study, a number will be assigned to your child to identify interview responses and protect the child's privacy. 6) In the interview, graduates respond to the questions provided in advance about their experiences with Ridge and Valley Charter School, listen to other participants' responses, and participate in any group discussion that follows. Graduates will be asked to remember experiences with Ridge and Valley Charter School, talk about the school's effect, and share stories about RVCS if they wish. The interviews will be recorded. If you do not agree to have your child's interview recorded, your child may not be in the study. Graduates age 17 and under are invited to participate only in group interviews of three or more participants. Graduates are not required to answer all of the questions and may end the interview at any time without consequence or penalty. You and your child will have an opportunity to see the results of the research.**

**5. RISKS/BENEFITS**

**This study has the following risks: For some participants, some memories of Ridge and Valley Charter School may be uncomfortable or painful to recall. Every effort will be made to provide a comfortable, empathetic research atmosphere. Your child's name will not be attached to the responses, only an assigned number. Graduates may choose what they want to say and may choose not to answer any question.**

**The benefits of participation are: contributing to knowledge of New Jersey public charter schools through telling the story of one school's beginning. Graduates also may enjoy sharing the story of their experience of RVCS and discussing the school with other graduates. Light refreshments will be served at the interview.**

**6. CONFIDENTIALITY**

**Ms. Barnett will keep the recordings of the interviews and written notes about them safe. No one else will be able to listen to or read them. Your child's privacy will be protected by using an assigned number for each participant instead of a name. General labels (for example, "graduate") and summaries of group responses will be used wherever possible. When the results of the research are published in dissertation form, no names of participants age 17 or under will be used and no information that would make it possible to identify them will be included.**

**7. VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY**

**Your decision whether or not your child may participate in this research will not affect your or your child's current or future relations with Drew University or Ridge and Valley Charter School. If you decide your child may participate in this**

**study, you and your child are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships and without penalty.**

**8. CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

**A Debriefing Form will be provided on completion of the interview(s). The Form explains the purpose and methods of this research and provides contact information for the researcher and responsible faculty advisor.**

**The researcher conducting this study is Carol M. (Kerry) Barnett. You and your child may ask any questions you have right now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher at barnettc@centenarycollege.edu or (908) 362-7244.**

**If you have questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to speak with someone other than the researcher, you may contact her advisor Dr. William Rogers, wrogers@drew.edu, telephone (973) 408-3285. If you have questions about the study but want to talk to someone else who is not connected to the study, you can call the Drew University Institutional Review Board (IRB) in care of Ms. Lois Levy, Adjunct Instructor in the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies at (973) 408-3000.**

**9. STATEMENT OF PARENTAL/LEGAL GUARDIAN CONSENT**

**The procedures of this study have been explained to me and my child and our questions have been addressed. I understand that the interview will be recorded and that if I do not wish my child to be recorded, the child may not participate in the study. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that the child may withdraw at any time without penalty. If I have any concerns about my child's experience in this study (e.g., that the child was treated unfairly or felt unnecessarily threatened), I may contact the Chair of the Drew Institutional Review Board regarding my concerns.**

**Parent/legal guardian of participant age 17 or younger signature:**

**_____**

**Date_____**

# RIDGE AND VALLEY CHARTER SCHOOL: THE FIRST TEN YEARS

## DEBRIEFING FORM

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### 1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

**The study in which you or your child just participated was designed to document the important ideas and application of those ideas in the first ten years of Ridge and Valley Charter School. To date, no research has been conducted specifically on RVCS, though studies have been completed on New Jersey's Charter School program and on collaboration in businesses and institutions. Your participation brings unique individual perspectives and experiences to this first formal study of RVCS.**

### 2. METHODOLOGY

**In this study you were asked to agree on a time and place for an interview; provide your own transportation to the scheduled interview; and respond to specific questions about your experiences with Ridge and Valley Charter School provided in advance and, if in a group interview, listen to other participants' responses and participate in any subsequent discussion. You were asked to recall personal experiences with Ridge and Valley Charter School, reflect on them, and share stories to illustrate your point of view.**

### 3. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**For more information on the topic of this research, you may wish to consult *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, the *New Jersey Charter School Program Act of 1995* (P.L. 1995 c. 426, *N.J.S.A.* 18A:36A) http://www.state.nj.us/education/chartsch/cspa95.htm, and the published public minutes of Ridge and Valley Charter School trustees at www.ridgeandvalley.org**

### 4. CONTACT INFORMATION

**If you are interested in learning more about the research being conducted, or the results of the research of which you were a part, please do not hesitate to contact Carol M. (Kerry) Barnett, barnettc@centenarycollege.edu, telephone (908) 362-7244 or Dr. William Rogers, wrogers@drew.edu, telephone (973) 408-3285.**

**Thank you for your help and participation in this study.**

# RIDGE AND VALLEY CHARTER SCHOOL: THE FIRST TEN YEARS

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS AND QUESTIONS

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### 1. INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

**All interviews will be conducted according to the circle gathering protocols outlined in *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea and accessible on the PeerSpirit website at www.peerspirit.org. All potential interviewees have had experience with this methodology in their roles as Ridge and Valley Charter School founders, trustees, staff, or graduates.**

**Particularly relevant aspects of this style of conversation include: invitation from the host (in this case, the Principal Investigator), explicitly stated intention, opening inspirational reading, initial check-in or greeting from each participant, designated individual to monitor group process and signal for a pause when deemed necessary by that individual or anyone in the group, use of a talking piece when desired to designate the (only) individual speaking, use of discussion council for free-form open conversation, formal closure and thank you from the host, individual comment and check-out by each participant, inspirational closing reading. In the invitation letters, participants will be provided the interview questions and reminded of the PeerSpirit circle format and that the interviews will be digitally recorded. Participants will be informed that if they do not agree that their responses in the interview may be digitally recorded, they may not participate in the study.**

### 2. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: ALL PARTICIPANTS

**A. What was and/or is your role at Ridge and Valley Charter School?**
**B. How did you first become involved with Ridge and Valley Charter School?**
**C. What is your understanding of the mission of Ridge and Valley Charter School?**
**D. Are any aspects of the school's mission important to you personally? If so, what one(s)?**
**E. Would you like to share a personal anecdote or memory that feels representative of your experience with Ridge and Valley Charter School?**

### 3. ADDITIONAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: FOUNDERS

**F. What do you remember as among the greatest challenges in the founding period of Ridge and Valley Charter School, in the years before the school opened?**
**G. Do you think the school has made progress in actualizing the vision of the founders? If so, in what way? If not, in what way?**
**H. Were there any particular actions, people, or events that you feel were decisive in determining the future of Ridge and Valley Charter School in the founding period, the years before the school opened?**

**4. ADDITIONAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: TRUSTEES**

**I. What motivated you to become a trustee at Ridge and Valley Charter School?**

**J. Do you think the school has made progress in actualizing the vision of the founders? If so, in what way? If not, in what way?**

**K. What do you see as critical needs for the school to develop and progress in actualizing the vision of the founders?**

**5. ADDITIONAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: ALUMNI/AE**

**L. What did you do educationally after graduating from Ridge and Valley Charter School?**

**M. Has your Ridge and Valley Charter School experience impacted your subsequent education in any specific way, positively or negatively? How?**

**N. Would you recommend Ridge and Valley Charter School to prospective students? Why or why not?**

# Ridge and Valley Charter School

**Educating Children for a Hopeful Sustainable Future**
**1234 State Route 94 Blairstown, NJ 07825**
**(908) 362-1114 Fax: (908) 362-6680**
**email: office@ridgeandvalley.org www.ridgeandvalley.org**

October 6, 2011

Dear Chair and Members, Drew University Institutional Review Board,

The trustees and Leadership Team of Ridge and Valley Charter School offer our institutional support to Drew University Casperson School of Graduate Studies Arts and Letters doctoral candidate Carol M. Barnett for her dissertation study, "Ridge and Valley Charter School: The First Ten Years." We understand that the research for this project will involve review of archived public documents, personal notes, emails, and reflections of Ms. Barnett and other voluntary participants, and individual and group interviews of invited members of our trustee, staff, and alumni community conducted by in person at our location outside of school hours or at the Ecozoica Lounge, Main Street, Blairstown, NJ.

We agree to send an email to trustees, staff, alumni, and parents/legal guardians of alumni informing them of the study and inviting them to contact Ms. Barnett directly if they wish to be considered for participation. We look forward to cooperating with Ms. Barnett in her review of the founding, establishment, and initial operations of Ridge and Valley Charter School.

Sincerely,

Electronic signatures:

David McNulty
Trustee Co-coordinator, RVCS

Nanci Dvorsky
Administrative Coordinator, RVCS

## D: Digital Appendix Table of Contents

For the school archives and to support future research, an electronic appendix accompanies the project and contains electronic copies of many of these resources.

Ridge and Valley Charter School

- 2013 RVCS Student and Alumni Survey Report
- Annual NJ Department of Education Assessments 2004 – 2012
- Annual Reports 2004 – 2013
- Board of Trustee Minutes: 2001 – 2013
- Board of Trustees By-Laws
- Budget and Cash Flow 2013-2014
- Charter Application 2001
- Charter Renewal Applications 2007, 2012
- Curriculum Framework
- Expeditionary Learning Scope and Sequence
- Family Handbook 2013
- Foundational Principles: July 2012 Evolution
- Guide Evaluation Rubric 2013
- Leadership Team Evaluation 2013
- Student Application
- Trustee Self-Evaluation 2012

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