

Quantum leap



A RADICAL IDEA FOR KEEPING KIDS IN SCHOOL

by Becca MacLaren

Any explorer who discovers new terrain—physical, creative, or otherwise—begins by asking questions. Five years ago, the founders of the Quantum Leap program had a few: Could the Bennington Plan work in a public school setting? Could the Plan Process get at-risk kids excited about learning?

Susan Sgorbati '72 and **Danny Michaelson**, faculty members at Bennington for more than 20 years, with these questions in mind launched Quantum Leap. The pilot program—a mix of the Plan Process, mentoring, and mediation—aimed to tackle the alarming rates of truancy in the town's primary and secondary schools.

What started as a volunteer-run experiment has developed into a strong partnership between the College and the local public school district. Quantum Leap now serves as a model for schools all over the state and country. Its innovative and effective approach to learning has been recognized in other

ways; Quantum Leap's extraordinary growth has been made possible by generous private and public support.

To date, the program has served 155 elementary, middle, and high school students; all but five of the current students are enrolled in an accredited academic program and have shown a decrease in violent or self-destructive behavior.

"In five years, Quantum Leap went from 7 to 104 students," says Sgorbati. "We have 18 mentors working for us. Just yesterday we were saying: 'How did this happen?'"

The program grew out of what Sgorbati calls a "radical idea"—giving at-risk students responsibility to initiate their own goals. Quantum Leap students learn and practice conflict resolution skills and work to identify issues that have prevented them from succeeding. Mentors, who are Bennington students and members of the community, are trained in mediation to

continued on page 26

Quantum Leap in the Community

“Social relationships are a big part of what determines the spirit of a community,” says **Matthew Moss '94**, a Quantum Leap mentor. “Those relationships are something we need to build here [in Bennington].”

To strengthen the spirit of his community and to expose Quantum Leap students to career options and cultural experiences outside of school, Moss has started to collaborate with local businesses and individuals. He launched a new program last fall with the help of community member **Bill Scully '94** and the staff of Pangaea, Scully's restaurant in North Bennington. In a series of five after-school workshops, a group of teenage students learned how to prepare a gourmet meal. In kitchens donated by individuals in the community, the students worked on preparing everything from mushroom strudel to fine pastries.

Each student was responsible for preparing one course of the meal; as the culminating project, they cooked and served that meal at Scully's restaurant to a dozen guests, including an adult of their choice and several community leaders. Though they were shy at first—and a bit reluctant about unfamiliar menu items like scallops—they really came out of their shells, says Scully.

“When the students brought out all the food that they had made, they went around the restaurant saying, ‘Look what we did!’ They were so excited—they were bouncing off the walls.”

Not only the kids were excited; several diners in the packed dining room of Pangaea expressed interest in hosting the program. This support and enthusiasm is exactly what Moss was seeking.

“When you involve the community in education, kids become connected,” he said. “With this program we're looking to help students develop a relationship with what they're learning and an attachment to local people and things.”

This past spring Quantum Leap students worked with a master gardener on the design and implementation of a new garden for the courtyard at Mount Anthony Union High School.

Looking ahead, Moss is drawing on the strong relationship, forged through Quantum Leap, with Mount Anthony. He hopes to see the program integrated into classroom curriculum with students engaged and learning in—and with—the community. “We all have a lot to learn.”

Photo on left: **Bill Scully '94** teaching Casandra Simmons and Katie Loomis how to prepare a gourmet meal for “The Pangaea Project.”
Photograph by Shira Sternberg '05.

Photo on right: Tenth-grader Katie Loomis and **Shira Sternberg '05**. “Through Quantum Leap I've learned firsthand how to effect social change in public education,” says Sternberg, the new Civic Engagement Coordinator at Bennington. She calls Katie “my pride and joy.”
Photograph by Matthew Moss '94.

Photographs (opposite) by Sierra Buck.



Support for Quantum Leap, 2003-05

A.D. Henderson Foundation
Leir Charitable Trust
Mount Anthony Union High School
Permanent Fund for the Well-Being of Vermont Child
Southwestern Vermont Health Care Corporation
Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union
State of Vermont
Velmans Foundation
Vermont Agency of Human Services
Vermont Community Foundation
Private individuals

Quantum Leap Projects

Theater Arts Mentorship Project: a collaborative project with the Center for Restorative Justice in Bennington in which adolescents convicted of minor offenses write, direct, and produce their own plays.

What's GNU? Global Network of Understanding: an international exchange that uses the Internet to connect students at Bennington's Mount Anthony Union Middle School with students in Kenya, Nigeria, and Pakistan.

Project Leap: an after-school leadership program using an adventure-based, experiential learning approach.

Real People Theater (RPT) Project: continued collaboration with a theater group for at-risk youth in Brooklyn, NY.

continued from page 24

facilitate meetings between students, family members, and school personnel. They also help students develop an educational Plan that reconnects them to learning.

Michaelson says this is precisely what sets Quantum Leap apart from other mentoring programs. "It always circles back to education. That makes a Quantum Leap mentor more than a role model or a good pal."

Quantum Leap recently received support from the state of Vermont. The Governor recognized the value of the program in its importance to the community. Therefore, the Governor recommended in its fiscal year 2005 budget and the Legislature concurred that \$50,000 of the general fund should be appropriated for this program.

Named a "Best Practice" by the Vermont Agency of Human Services, the program has become a model for schools across southern Vermont. Schools in several major urban areas have also expressed interest; Sgorbati and Michaelson have consulted with educators from New York to Ohio.

A BENNINGTON APPROACH

"I just love it. I love that somebody would think of that." Danny Michaelson is talking about how one Quantum Leap mentor got a student to connect with a school subject that was difficult for him.

Last year **Nik Krause '06**, who studies Chinese, worked with an elementary school student who struggled with reading. Krause, aware of the boy's keen visual sense, introduced him to Chinese characters. Through this approach, he helped the student to make strides in his reading.

"Bennington students come up with really out-of-the-box ideas," says Michaelson. "I think that's why the mesh with the College has been so successful."

As mentors, Bennington students provide a meaningful look into a future that involves college—a future that some Quantum Leap students might not have otherwise imagined possible. Like all mentors, they undergo 20 hours of mediation training in *The Art of Negotiation and Mediation*, one of several courses taught by Sgorbati and Michaelson.

The thinking involved with Quantum Leap is not only fresh, it's also nearly limitless. Most social service agencies and people in the helping professions are limited by the types of problems they can address, notes Sgorbati. Through Quantum Leap, mentors have done everything from buying a prom dress to providing money for a family to buy groceries.

"We have the freedom to do what is necessary to help a kid get back in school," says Sgorbati. "That's pretty amazing."

“Mediation—an alternative way of dealing with conflict—works to solve problems,” says Michaelson. “It permeates everything we do. It’s the language we speak.”

THE LANGUAGE OF MEDIATION

Creative problem solving is at the heart of Quantum Leap, no accident given that Sgorbati is a dancer/choreographer and Michaelson is a costume/set designer. Their approach to problem solving—flexible but focused—comes naturally from their theater background and work as professional mediators.

“Mediation—an alternative way of dealing with conflict—works to solve problems,” says Michaelson. “It permeates everything we do. It’s the language we speak.”

In fact, Sgorbati and Michaelson had a “lightbulb moment” writing a recent grant report. “We realized that we were integrating the steps of the mediation process directly into the structure of this program,” says Sgorbati. What is known in mediation as an agreement—reached through nonjudgmental listening and exchange—is a Quantum Leap student’s Plan.

Starting this year, every student in an alternative program at Bennington’s Mount Anthony Union High School will develop an educational Plan. The high school is also taking over management of the full-time Quantum Leap classroom it has hosted since 2002.

The classroom, a space that allows students at risk of dropping out to focus on their interests and take courses in anger management, was staffed by full-time teachers who came directly out of Bennington: **Rachael Torchia '02**, **Oona Gilles-Weil '00**, and **Dave Cornwell MAT '05**. This year **April West '98**, **MAT '06** will join the classroom staff.

Sgorbati and Michaelson have led a training workshop for the entire teaching faculty at Mount Anthony—part of their plan to hand the program over to the school.

Believing that education should involve parents, educators, school boards, supervisory unions, business people, state agencies, and especially students, Sgorbati and Michaelson are thrilled to see Quantum Leap grow and take on new shape in their community and across the state and country.

Quantum Leap—this radical idea—makes a lot of sense, says Michaelson. “Working with a person’s strengths and interests— isn’t that what education should be?”



Dave Cornwell MAT '05, Michaelson, Sgorbati, and Jordan Caslin in the Quantum Leap classroom at Mount Anthony Union High School.