

**Five years with Talbot Hill MicroSociety Program – An SVP Investee Profile
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TALBOT HILL MICROSOCIETY PROGRAM

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Reform of our educational system will take time and unwavering commitment. It will require equally widespread, energetic, and dedicated action. Help should come from students themselves; from parents, teachers, and school boards; from colleges and universities; from local, State, and Federal officials; from teachers' and administrators' organizations; from industrial and labor councils; and from other groups with interest in and responsibility for educational reform.¹

This call to action appeared in the 1983 federal report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform*. The report, while both praised and criticized, turned the nation towards re-examination of public education and launched many school reform efforts. Sheryl Dunton, current Principal of Talbot Hill Elementary School and former Program Coordinator of the Talbot Hill MicroSociety Program, explains:

Nationwide we started looking at the practice [of teaching]. We realized that kids were coming to us and we weren't doing our job. [As a nation] we asked, how can we go about being smarter, better and more attentive to kids' needs? How can we do a better job of making the connection that what they are learning in school is relevant and important in their lives both now and in their future. At the same time the federal government was looking at ways they could help support that too. They started looking at ways to implement reform programs in packages. So while many school reform models are in effect packages, per say, the larger philosophy behind school reform is to look at how we are providing instruction. That's the bottom line for it and what will make a real difference in what we are doing.

One such school reform model is the MicroSociety Program. The first MicroSociety program was born in 1967 in a classroom in Brooklyn, New York. This model slowly developed in the 1970's largely through the efforts of one teacher. By the 1980's MicroSociety classrooms began popping up more frequently in New York, Maryland and Ohio as the program received increasing attention in the media. In 1992, the number of MicroSociety programs around the country jumped from seven to twenty-one and from there the model flourished.

The Talbot Hill MicroSociety program² was launched in 1994 at Talbot Hill Elementary School, located in the Renton School District, about 11 miles southeast of Seattle, Washington. In 1997, Sheryl Dunton, then Program Coordinator for the MicroSociety program at Talbot Hill, applied for and received a grant from Social Venture Partners (SVP). It was the first year of existence for SVP and thus the first cycle of grants for SVP's Education Grant Committee. Over the course of

¹ Excerpted from the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*,
<http://www.goalline.org/Goal%20Line/NatAtRisk.html#anchor809864>

² The Talbot Hill MicroSociety Program was originally called the Talbot Hill Community Ventures Program.

a five year relationship with Talbot Hill MicroSociety, SVP provided a total of \$184,000 in grants, \$12,000 in paid consultant support and 17 strategic and program volunteers.

	Grant Amount		Purpose
Year 1	\$24,000		General operating support
Year 2	\$40,000		Continued support for the MicroSociety Program, including funds to hire a part-time program coordinator and improve technology use.
Year 3	\$45,000		General operating support
Year 4	\$40,000		Provide funding towards the Program Director's salary
			Hire classified staff to provide project support
			Hire a consultant or contract fundraiser to assist with Board and Fund development
Year 5	\$35,000		Provide partial salary funding and benefits for the Program Director's and Program Assistant's salary

Background

SVP seeks to develop philanthropy and volunteerism to achieve positive social change in the Puget Sound region. Using the venture capital approach as a model, SVP is committed to giving time, money and expertise to create partnerships with K-12 education, out-of-school time and environment not-for-profit organizations. SVP helps nonprofits to be as effective as possible in delivering their programs and services by helping to build their organizational capacity. SVP defines Organizational Capacity Building as the development of core skills, management practices, strategies, and systems to enhance an organization's effectiveness, sustainability and ability to fulfill its mission.

SVP supports capacity building for its investees³ by providing cash grants, skilled volunteers, professional consultants, leadership development and management training opportunities. These resources are provided in areas such as financial management, fundraising and revenue development, information technology, marketing & public relations, program evaluation and performance management, human resources, strategic planning, legal, leadership development and board development and governance. SVP awards yearly grants with the expectation of engaging in a 3-5 year highly involved, hands-on relationship with an organization.

The Talbot Hill MicroSociety program is based on the national *MicroSociety*® program strategies that model the real world in an academic setting. The mission of the program is to guide students in applying academic skills, practicing communication and critical thinking, exhibiting exemplary citizenship, and using information technology to solve real-world problems in their own small learning communities. This school reform program allows students to create and run their own

³ SVP uses the term "investee" rather than grantee to connote a long-term grantor-grantee relationship predicated on the investment of time and shared goals by the funder.

community, becoming managers of businesses, courts, legislatures, and other cultural institutions. As they progress, they become immersed in the realities of a free market economy – complete with taxes, property concerns, technology applications, government, laws and even unemployment. Through this interactive approach, the students come to understand the political, moral and socio-economic forces affecting society, as well as the skills they need to develop to succeed in the workplace.

Talbot Hill MicroSociety meets three days a week for one hour in the afternoon, with the philosophy of the program guiding all decisions and curricular focus throughout the school the rest of the week. In September and October, students go through an orientation where they learn about MicroSociety, vote for leadership positions, learn about economics and the various jobs available. By November, the student legislature is elected and students have started their jobs. Starting in January, Marketplace is held once a month where small businesses open up to sell their goods and all services, such as the bank, post office, court and newspaper are accessible. “Organizations” are businesses or services that are part of Talbot Hill’s MicroSociety such as government, entrepreneurship, court, bank, post office, newspaper, restaurant, IRS, media, humanities and technology. A teacher is assigned to each organization to help the students in that area.

SVP chose Talbot Hill as an investee in 1998 through the Education Grant Committee⁴. SVP’s grant was disbursed to the Talbot Hill Educational Trust Fund, a 501(c)3 organization, formed in 1997 to support the resource and operational needs of the MicroSociety Program. The Trust Fund supports the long-range goals of the MicroSociety Program: to prepare teachers to become key change agents in school reform and to engage students in problem solving as they apply the skills they will need to succeed in the real world.

In the 1997-98 school year, 52% of the students at Talbot Hill Elementary belonged to ethnic minority groups, more than 30% came from limited English-speaking households, 43% received free or reduced-price lunch and almost one-third of students would transfer in or out of the school before the year is over. The operating budget in 1997-98 for the MicroSociety Program was about \$25,000. The program employed a Project Director at .2 FTE and gave out small planning stipends to teachers participating in the program.

The SVP Education Grant Committee was drawn to Talbot Hill because of their innovative and prevention-focused program. The Committee saw that the program was developed locally but mapped to a broader national education trend of applied learning and follows the national *MicroSociety*® model. The Grant Committee was impressed with the progress the program had already made. During the funding process they noted that the program “began with economics, grew to business management, banking, government, law, a newspaper, social work, and now will expand into ethics and multi-media communication.”

In the eyes of the Grant Committee, Talbot Hill focused on prevention rather than intervention with this education reform model. Notes from the site visit team illuminated this aspect: “By helping kids understand how basic math and reading skills can make them more successful, it motivates them to succeed in school. By letting them work in teams it motivates and teaches team and community skills. By incorporating government and rule-making it teaches community values and understanding.”

⁴ SVP’s Education Grant Committee changed to the K-12 Education Grant Committee in 1999.

Initial Impact

Keith Rowe, a SVP Partner, volunteered to be the Lead Partner for Talbot Hill. The Lead Partner acts as liaison between SVP staff, volunteers, and the investee, Talbot Hill. The Lead Partner plays a pivotal role by working regularly with the investee to identify and prioritize volunteer projects, set and monitor objectives, develop the overall vision for the long-term relationship with SVP and oversee budget needs or modifications to uses of SVP's grant money. Keith was the Lead Partner for Talbot Hill for the entire five years of the SVP funding relationship.

Prior to becoming the Lead Partner for Talbot Hill, Keith spent nine years in the technology industry in Seattle as a technical project manager doing corporate strategy, leading teams, negotiating business contracts and making technical presentations to large audiences. He joined SVP specifically for "opportunities to branch out and learn about philanthropy, grant making and nonprofits. I came in [to SVP] totally cold. I knew how to run businesses but I didn't know anything about how nonprofits work, or the realm of public education for that matter."

Keith noted what it is like in the for-profit sector. "When you get a good idea, it gets momentum, people throw money at it and before you know it you have 200 people working on something when there were just five of you on it before." In contrast, Keith explained his transition from the for profit sector to the non profit world:

Even though people told me it's not like the business world, it's not going to be like running a group [in the private sector], I still didn't absorb that as the truth. So, my initial thought of what was going to happen [at Talbot Hill] was a much bolder vision. I thought, "This is a great program, everybody should have this program, we'll just get on the phone and call people, they'll immediately get it and we'll spread this through the whole Northwest." [I still had] this notion that you could scale a nonprofit as quickly as you can scale a for-profit business. I guess I came with the expectation that a good idea, with smart people, will snowball and magically it will end up being a hundred times bigger than it was.

Keith's candid recount of his initial impressions and expectations of being a Lead Partner were common for SVP in the initial years. Many SVP partners and volunteers came from the for-profit world and were confronted with the differences in cultures and the availability of resources for the two sectors. However, there was a way for SVP to get involved with Talbot Hill early on to provide immediate help while also allowing SVP volunteers to bridge the gap of the business and non-profit worlds. Keith explains:

The first year we were mostly looking for SVP partners who wanted to work with teachers directly on giving them coaching advice on how to run their parts of the program. So we went through and looked at all the different disciplines that appeared in the MicroSociety curriculum and then queried volunteers who wanted to work with teachers.

For example, there was a teacher whose job it was to manage the court and the legal system. The kids were the lawyers, district attorneys and judges. The teacher who ran that strand said, "Everything I know about the legal system I learned watching L.A. Law." She never had any real legal training so there was a limit to how accurate it all was. So we (SVP) brought in James McBain, an SVP

Partner and attorney, and he was able to work with her, clean up her system and make it more accurate. He introduced a couple new levels of law as well. Before, all they had was a constitution so everything was a constitutional law. He was able to introduce the idea of by-laws because they are easier to change, simpler and had smaller consequences if you violated them.

He continues:

Similarly, we had a SVP Partner and CFO come in and look at the accounting system they used for the entrepreneur students to keep their accounts and run their businesses. He worked with the teachers and came up with a one page form that simplified it but was still accurate. So those are examples of SVP volunteers coming in. That's why it seemed like such a good program for us initially because there were lots of opportunities for people with business skills to come in and help for a couple weeks or months and have a direct impact.

Being able to plug into the school early on and have some direct impact was critical to establishing a positive and successful relationship between SVP and Talbot Hill. Keith, as the Lead Partner, was able to get SVP volunteers into the school while at the same time listen and learn about the program and allow the relationship to build gradually:

I tried to come in very humbly saying, we're here to help, what can we do? I think that was one of the things that was good about doing these engagements where we directly supported the programs initially. We didn't come in with guns blazing saying, you need to change this, why is the board like this, your fundraising isn't right, etc. Coming with all those high level things is daunting.

For Sheryl Dunton, who at the time was Program Coordinator of the MicroSociety program, the biggest impact SVP had early on was the funding of her position. Initially, Sheryl worked as a speech pathologist for the Renton School District. She worked four days out of five doing speech language therapy around the district. One day a week she was the Program Coordinator for the Talbot Hill MicroSociety Program. In reality she was spending half her time or more working on MicroSociety issues. SVP's initial grant to Talbot Hill provided funding to transition Sheryl as a full time employee of the MicroSociety Program.

“That was a huge thing because what it did was allow for our program to grow at a much more accelerated pace because I had the time to give towards it,” explained Sheryl.

Volunteer Focus

Over the course of five years, SVP infused Talbot Hill with a total of 17 volunteers. Many of those volunteers were program focused, helping out as guest speakers in the Mini-College, working with teachers on their particular strand or helping start a new strand for the MicroSociety Program.

Keith and a colleague of his spent a year working with the kids to start a television news strand for the MicroSociety Program. They set up a newsroom and taught them how to run it and how to make a business out of it. A couple SVP volunteers came in and set up an email system for the

kids to use. Another SVP volunteer came in and helped set up an online ordering system for the warehouse. Keith elaborated:

All the junior entrepreneurs put out order requests on pieces of paper and mailed them to the warehouse. Then the warehouse would have a bunch of kids running around picking supplies out, mostly craft supplies, and putting together box orders and then shipping them over to the entrepreneurs. So the SVP volunteer came in and developed an online warehouse so the kids could look up on the website, order all the pieces they wanted and it would tally it all up.

Richard Ney, a SVP Partner with experience in sales, sales and marketing management, and strategic partnerships worked with the student-run TV station on advertising. He explained:

The KATS-TV (student-run TV station) students needed to be able to explain the benefits of TV advertising to the student-run businesses so those businesses would advertise on KATS-TV and the station could generate advertising revenue. The students also wanted to know how to create good ads because once a student-run business signed up for advertising, it was up to the KATS-TV students to create or help create the advertisement. So I talked about general advertising concepts, the importance of knowing your customer, the elements of a good TV advertisement, the steps they needed to go through to create an advertisement, when an ad typically reached maximum effectiveness, how to evaluate their competition and how to use success stories as a marketing tool to get other student-run businesses to advertise.

Richard also used his marketing expertise to work with one of the student-run business:

The singing telegram business wanted to know about developing new products so I spoke with them about product lifecycles and market research. We discussed product lifecycle stages, market saturation, what market research could tell them and the techniques they could use to research their ideas for new products.

These types of volunteer tasks played a key role in enhancing and improving the program both with support for the kids as well as the teachers. The teachers received help from business people to feel more empowered and knowledgeable in their discipline. The students were exposed to new areas of business, such as the television news station, and were able to hear about different aspects of the business world.

In addition, these programmatic volunteers in the early stages of the relationship provided the critical foundation needed for the more strategic, capacity-focused work in future years. With this unique form of grantor-grantee relationship, it takes time to build a good working relationship. By engaging hands-on and helping in tangible ways at the start of the relationship, these volunteer projects helped lay the groundwork of trust for the future of the relationship between Talbot Hill and SVP.

In their refunding proposal for the second year, Talbot Hill reflected on the impact SVP had in the first year of the relationship:

The greatest success of the partnership with SVP has been the relationships that have developed between members [SVP Partners] and the staff and students of Talbot Hill. The SVP volunteers have provided ongoing consultation and expertise to the various strands. The strength of this partnership, we believe, is due to the fact that we are able to utilize the SVP members' knowledge and skills in applicable avenues necessary for the development of our program. Our staff and students have been able to receive advice on general and very specific topics needed to either help the strand run more realistically or smoothly. Whether it is how to best set up a spread sheet for the business strand to document profits or the TV strand to understand the many steps for production, SVP involvement has been invaluable and greatly appreciated.

SVP Volunteer Resources

STRATEGIC VOLUNTEERS	PROGRAM VOLUNTEERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology – website, database, internet • Marketing • Strategic Planning* • Board Development* • Fund Development* • Outcomes and Evaluation Framework* <p>* includes paid outside consulting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mini-College Professor • Financial Strand • Legal Strand • Business Strand • MicroSociety Mentors

Capacity Building

SVP's volunteer work often transitions from program-focused to organization-focused after the first year. Over the course of the five year relationship with Talbot Hill, the crux of the impact SVP had was with the eight SVP volunteers who focused on building the capacity of the organization. SVP worked with Talbot Hill in many areas of capacity building such as board development, fund development, evaluation and outcomes planning, strategic planning and leadership development.

Fund Development

Talbot Hill identified the importance of developing a cohesive plan to address issues of financial stability and long-term program sustainability in their 2000 Refunding Proposal to SVP. As a result, SVP developed curriculum and hired a local fundraising consultant to facilitate five monthly group training workshops on fund development for investees. Sheryl attended these group trainings that were followed up with three hours of one-on-one consultation with the project consultant.

Attending those trainings on fund development impressed upon Sheryl and Talbot Hill the value of having an effective and active board. She notes, "Starting with those classes that we went to, that kind of spurred on the whole understanding that we needed to really reshape our board."

Board Development

The original board of the Talbot Hill Educational Trust consisted primarily of staff, teachers and former teachers. Sheryl noted:

We really weren't operating like a board. Basically we were a collection of people who were trying to grasp at ideas and ways to fund this innovative idea in our school, but we didn't really know how we were doing it. To move from just a collection of primarily staff to a board that really had bylaws and had a composition based on skills, it was a total turnaround.

Since 2000, SVP has set aside funding to hire independent consultants to meet needs of investees when a SVP volunteer with the right skills can't be identified. For board development, SVP contracted the services of Susan Howlett, a nonprofit consultant specializing in Fund Development and Board Development. With Susan's recommendations and SVP volunteer assistance, Talbot Hill assessed the current Board composition and structure and developed a plan to move the Board from an "advisory" role to a more fully developed nonprofit board.

According to its 2002 Refunding Proposal to SVP, Talbot Hill "assessed the skills of current board members in fundraising, diversity of representation, personality and background; prioritized the deficit areas to achieve a balance among staff, parents and community; reviewed and rewrote the by-laws creating responsibilities and expectations for board members; created job descriptions for board executive officers; recruited and invited 5-8 new board members to address identified deficiencies; and developed a board handbook with responsibilities and resources."

As a result of their involvement with Talbot Hill MicroSociety Program, Keith Rowe and Richard Ney became members of the Talbot Hill board. Richard served as the Fund Development Committee Chair in addition to becoming Vice-President and eventually President of the board. Both Keith and Richard continued their involvement on the board after the relationship between SVP and Talbot formally ended.

Strategic Planning

SVP engaged in a great deal of work with Talbot Hill on the strategic direction and longer-term vision of the program. SVP underwrote the expense of hiring a strategic planning consultant to facilitate a two-day planning retreat for Talbot Hill. Keith explained:

That went from, "We're going to spread this program throughout King County and the rest of the world," to "No, we're just going to do a really good job of delivering to the kids we have and look at expanding to just one more school."

The MicroSociety Program was looking to expand to the middle school for which Talbot Hill is a feeder school. In reality, the Talbot Hill kids spend the first five or six years of their schooling in the MicroSociety Program. When they get to middle school the curriculum has changed drastically and the entire school atmosphere is more traditional. The kids from Talbot Hill are often far ahead of their peers in terms of leadership and real world skills. Therefore, the MicroSociety Program has been working for many years to get this middle school to adopt the program.

Outcomes Framework

SVP contracted with Organizational Research Services (ORS) to help Talbot Hill develop an outcomes evaluation framework. Sheryl explains:

I think the process was just so wonderful to go through, to really clearly define what it is that we think is happening with our program and then develop a model to evaluate that on an annual basis. In my mind, it was quantifying information that I thought was purely qualitative. Having someone really look at our work and be able to sit down and say, “here are the indicators that would show you what is making a difference” was extremely valuable. I would never have been able to do that. So I feel that we utilized that resource really well.

The goal of this consulting project was to help Talbot Hill develop a formal mechanism for measuring the impact of the MicroSociety program. Talbot Hill worked with ORS over a four-year period to develop outcomes, evaluation tools and analyze outcomes data.

This evaluation planning and outcomes strategy development is ongoing. Sheryl explains how they are using the information and data that is collected to inform how they manage class time, both in regular and MicroSociety time:

Programmatically what it showed us is that one of the cornerstones of our program is empowering kids to negotiate the choices they make. What it shows is that when we go into microtime⁵, we are much more willing to allow kids the freedom to be able to make decisions for themselves as opposed to during regular class time. It’s an issue about how student leadership gets integrated to any time of the day and what do we need to do in our classes to have our philosophy emulated all the time.

Sheryl further explains how they are using the outcomes and evaluation data:

We also take writing samples that show the kids are making good choices that have an impact in society. The results are two fold. One is that it allows us to see the complexity and development of their writing skills. It also lets us know that students are willing and able to take and initiate action in their community that a kid of their age wouldn’t otherwise be willing or able to do. The evaluation informs us of whether or not they are becoming leaders and self-motivated participants in our society.

So programmatically the work on outcomes and evaluation strategy made a difference. Hopefully it will make a difference as far as our public relations as well. We’ll use pieces of our outcomes and evaluation framework in our brochure and it is now the foundation for our annual report. It validates what we are doing and really shows we’re making a difference.

⁵ Microtime refers to the one hour period three times a week that the MicroSociety program occurs.

Leadership

SVP recognizes the importance of strong leadership and incorporates that into its support for investees. During Talbot Hill's last year of funding, SVP underwrote the tuition for Sheryl to attend a two-week intensive leadership training program at Stanford University. The Executive Program for Nonprofit Leaders is a two week professional development program at the Center for Social Innovation at Stanford University. The program integrates conceptual knowledge with participants own experience to generate powerful and practical insights about leadership and management.

This program had significant impact on Sheryl and her work as the Executive Director of Talbot Hill. She explains:

I learned so many valuable things about budgeting, management, building capacity and working with the Board. The most significant thing I came away with were the sessions on leadership and building an organization that is visionary and enduring. I really understand and try to put into practice the teachings of how important it is to have your organization aligned with vision and goals, so that no matter what happens at the top, the organization can endure if it is aligned. I was so impressed with the caliber of the Stanford faculty. It was truly a life changing experience, for which I am so grateful to SVP for the opportunity.

Refunding

Understanding SVP's funding process and expectations for a 3-5 year relationship was a critical piece for Sheryl and Talbot Hill.

Just knowing that the SVP relationship was going to last for more than one year was significant. So much work goes into just setting things up and isolating what you want to see happen that you can't really accomplish much in a year. So knowing that there is more than one year is so valuable.

Talbot Hill felt the funding and refunding process was time consuming and confusing. Part of this was due to the fact that Sheryl was new to fundraising and applying for grants, so much of the process was foreign to her the first year. "The first year I spent the whole month of February writing my refunding proposal. I couldn't get my hands on all the information and the way it was supposed to be presented."

It was also SVP's first year of grantmaking so SVP was learning along with Talbot Hill how this relationship would unfold. SVP was changing and adapting its practices along the way as they acquired feedback. Sheryl realized and understood that it was SVP's first year and that the processes weren't completely in place. She elaborates:

I never felt that things were being dictated to us. I always felt it was part of the growing process. I have to admit, with some grantors, I have really felt like it's been told to us how to do it, we're not given a rationale, and things that were never part of the relationship as far as expectations suddenly became

requirements. I never felt like that with SVP. So it was never a point of frustration other than the fact that it was changing.

The refunding proposal for year two highlighted this issue as well. The proposal stated, “We recognize that this being the first year of operation for SVP, we have been part of the evolution in developing the processes for funding. We appreciate the fact that SVP has so willingly welcomed our comments.” In subsequent years, SVP used the feedback from Talbot Hill and other first-year investees to set clearer processes and refunding practices with its new investees.

Overall Impact and Challenges

The growth of the MicroSociety program at Talbot Hill over the five years of its relationship with SVP was significant. Keith recalls:

The big difference is, within the school, the MicroSociety program became a much more central part of the curriculum. Before we were there, it was still optional, not all teachers participated, not all classes participated and it wasn't tied into the EALRS⁶ or the rest of the educational curriculum.

In July of 2002, Talbot Hill planned and hosted the national MicroSociety Conference at which their program was showcased to educators from across the country. Talbot Hill is now identified as a model MicroSociety school resulting in extra funding from the national *MicroSociety*® organization. Educators thinking about adopting a MicroSociety program often come to visit Talbot Hill to see their exemplary program in action.

While huge strides were made during the five year relationship, it wasn't without a fair share of challenges. As Lead Partner, Keith was well aware of the difficulty in bridging the cultures between for-profits and non-profits. This was a formidable obstacle for SVP with the first round of investees and remains on the radar today. Richard Ney identifies some of the key challenges for funders and investees to overcome in this type of highly-engaged long-term relationship:

Building trust between the funder and investee is critical. That requires frequent, straight-forward communication and honest evaluations of performance, results, goals and action plans, as well as engagement between various levels of management of the funder and the investee. Also important is making an effort to understand each organization's culture and respecting that, while at the same time re-orienting perceptions and expectations where necessary. And making a genuine effort to understand the critical factors and barriers to success and develop a plan that takes those into consideration and resisting the urge to come up with quick fixes to problem areas.

In addition, working with an organization that is part of a public school brings an added level of bureaucracy and obstacles. Keith explains:

⁶ The Washington State Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) are the result of efforts that began in 1993 to improve education standards in Washington State. EALRs were created by the State Commission on Student Learning to define expectations for student achievement in eight academic areas: Reading, Writing, Communications, Mathematics, Social Studies, Science, The Arts and Health Fitness.

[Working with schools] is a lot different. There are a few pluses - we have a few more funding sources and such, but the bureaucracy and the amount of struggle it takes to even continue the momentum within a program in a school shows how hard it is to work with schools over time, let alone school boards and school districts. It's astonishing how hard it is to get a new idea into schools. I had no idea it would be that hard.

Over the course of the five years, Keith and SVP volunteers were able to help Talbot Hill improve their relationship with the school board. "When we go [to the school district] for funding, it's hard to defend hiring someone who appears in the organizational chart as a manager. They want to know if there's a teacher in the classroom as a result of the funding. So, it's hard to sell them on the idea of paying for a full time director for MicroSociety."

Another significant barrier to overcome in working with schools, and in particular with the Executive Director of a program within a school, is being able to back away from the day to day operations of the school and think more strategically about the program. Keith explains:

I think we had a couple different challenges working with Talbot. On the one hand, they clearly knew how to run their school, but they were so caught up, and continue to be caught up, in the minutia of running the school, that it's very hard to get school leaders to break away and think more strategically and more broadly.

Sheryl said one of the hardest things she had to learn to do was to make the shift between playing a supporting role for teachers to the role of an Executive Director. In the early days, Sheryl was the one who shopped for materials and other such task oriented things. It took time for Sheryl to realize that the Executive Director's job is to focus more on raising money and planning for the next year and beyond. When Talbot Hill had the resources to hire Sheryl full time, she was able to hire people under her that could provide direct support to the teachers.

So part of our relationship was education, getting them to be more operational and forward thinking, more strategic in what they were doing. On SVP's side, it was more of us recognizing the realities of how change happens in nonprofits, and more specifically the public education realm. The expectation that you can write a great memo and then things will change is not true, it doesn't work like that. We had to scale back our expectations about what success would look like.

Keith volunteered as Lead Partner for the full five year relationship with Talbot Hill. He worked hard to help Sheryl and the rest of the staff and board move the MicroSociety program forward.

Ed Sheppard, then principal of Talbot Hill Elementary noted, "One thing that impresses me about Keith is his continuing interest in understanding the program. I don't know for certain but I sense that he advocates for us in group settings. He really wants to *know*. He is skillful in taking conversations and articulating them on paper. He's very concise and articulate. He gets right to the point, keeps us on task and is highly enthusiastic."

A sign that Keith spent time trying to understand the program, identifying how he could fit in and make an impact is in his recommendations for future relationships. He advises:

Even now I think we could do a better job to really pull back the reins in that first year and come in super humble and just say what can we do to help and not add to the burden of them doing all these new things. Just send some people in to do whatever they can to be helpful and then start building the relationship and trust to the point where you can start getting in tight with what is really going on. Then you can start talking about being here for a period of time and working on longer term issues. But you can't do that in year one.

He continues:

I think we stumbled along but eventually got to a really good place. I think in the early days we were overly ambitious and impatient at times. We could have been a little more realistic about what was possible and we would have distracted them less. We could have done more to recognize the scope and scale of what Talbot could accomplish in order to help them take the appropriate next steps. So I think there were some missteps in that way, but they weren't huge. I think having a 4-5 year plan for each organization that says, year 1 is get to know you, year 2-4 is the major chunk of work and let's go tackle those things, and year 5 is wrap-up. This might make it clearer to the organization what the relationship will look like.

Keith applies this recommendation to SVP's work with current investees now and in the future. He makes the point that in many ways the first cohort of investees SVP worked with was simpler because the work was completely new to everyone. Since its inception, SVP now has significantly more experience engaging in this type of relationship with an investee and therefore runs into a new challenge of managing this knowledge and applying it to new relationships. Keith stated:

I think the biggest challenge right now is that it was very easy for me to come in and be humble, because I really didn't know anything, I didn't know how my business experience would translate over to nonprofits. But I think what is more important now is that SVP has a lot more experience now and a lot more knowledge so it will continue to be a challenge for SVP and new partners to come in and be humble and listen.

Talbot Hill Going Forward

The long-term goals of the Talbot Hill MicroSociety Program are to prepare teachers to become key change agents in school reform and to engage students in problem solving as they apply the skills they will need to succeed in the real world. SVP seeks to help build and support the capacity of nonprofits in order for them to more effectively deliver their programs and services. Over the five year relationship with Talbot Hill, SVP contributed monetary funds in addition to volunteer and consultant resources to improve the organizational capacity of Talbot Hill resulting in a stronger program that delivers more effective services to its students.

“Talbot Hill is now one of three premier MicroSociety programs in the country,” Keith declares. The MicroSociety program itself has been adopted by more than 200 schools in 40 states and has received national recognition as a comprehensive school reform model.

“Talbot Hill is a leading edge school among the 200 or so MicroSociety schools across the United States and retaining that leadership role is something valued by the Talbot hill team,” Richard asserts.

With the No Child Left Behind Act, signed by President Bush in January 2002, the changing landscape of nationwide education reform now centers on standards and assessment. Talbot Hill has led the charge in this arena with the challenging task of assessing and documenting the performance of a MicroSociety program. Keith explains:

One of the important directions where they have led the curriculum for the MicroSociety programs is in tying MicroSociety curriculum to assessment. They actually have assessment models that other schools can use and they can tie those assessment models back to their state’s version of the Washington EALRS. Talbot has an assessment methodology for the work that is going on inside MicroSociety, even though it is sometimes chaotic and hard to assess. However, they can tie that all the way back to the state’s education requirements so people can see there is a real organized way in which the MicroSociety curriculum has an impact and works.

Through his involvement with the Talbot Hill board, Richard has noticed many positive changes:

I’ve seen positive changes in the board in many areas: a more professional board, a better skill mix among board members, an increased level of commitment to the program by board members, an attitude change among board members that has them doing work between board meetings not just in board meetings, an increased willingness to take risks and board members who might have preferred to remain in the background now step forward and take the lead on initiatives and projects.

The ongoing and ever present challenge for Talbot Hill moving forward is a focus on sustainability. All nonprofit organizations struggle to some degree to maintain a level of funding that allows them to focus on delivering their mission. This has been and continues to be a significant challenge for the Talbot Hill MicroSociety Program.

Sheryl explains:

Our ongoing challenge is how we can figure out a way to keep our program funded. The part that is frustrating is that we spend so much time looking for the next dollar that it is just so time consuming. We are looking for a focus of our resources that is the most time efficient and most effective. I just don’t know if we’ve found the right percentage of, for example, grants versus individual donors versus fundraising events.

Richard, now President of the board, agrees. “The major focus going forward is still on sustainability. The challenge is to find funding sources that have some long-term connection to the program and can be relied upon year after year.”

Sheryl Dunton is now the Principal of Talbot Hill Elementary School where she is able to continue strengthening the MicroSociety Program. Looking back, she considers how far they have come:

I think we still think of ourselves as one step ahead, but we are pretty much still year to year. Programmatically I don't think I would have guessed we would be where we are now. I think we've far exceeded what we had anticipated. We far exceeded the development of the board and what the board is doing. Personally I've learned so much. I feel like I know so much more about what it means to be an Executive Director.

During the five year, highly engaged relationship with SVP, the operating budget of the Talbot Hill Educational Trust Fund, the 501(c)3 organization that supports the resource and operational needs of the MicroSociety Program, went from \$25,000 in 1998 to \$161,500 in 2002. This reflects the growth the program made over five years both in its program delivery and its organizational capacity. SVP and Talbot Hill worked through challenges together during the course of the relationship that allowed both organizations to fulfill their missions. Sheryl concludes:

The energy level and enthusiasm [of the SVP volunteers] has been so uplifting. People came in with smiles on their faces. It was very validating that people in the community support what we're doing, especially to the staff. We're doing something innovative. It's hard work and it's a risk. It's great for the teachers to know there is support for what they are doing.

Postscript

In June 2004, Talbot Hill Elementary School received the Twenty-First Century Schools of Distinction Award. Created by Intel Corporation, Scholastic Inc., and the Blue Ribbon Schools of Excellence Foundation, this national award program “highlights the successes of the nation’s best schools, celebrates their use of technology, demonstrates the benefits of strong teamwork and showcases the classroom practices of excellent teachers.”⁷ Talbot Hill was one of twenty schools chosen for the award out of 1,200 schools nationwide. Each school received \$10,000 from the Intel Foundation as well as curriculum materials, professional development resources, and software and hardware prizes.

“The winners of the Twenty-First Century Schools of Distinction awards exemplify what is right with education in the United States,” said Intel CEO Craig Barrett. “Education can be transformed when a community of involved administrators, teachers and parents come together to achieve a common goal.”⁸

⁷ www.intel.com/education/schoolsofdistinction

⁸ <http://www.intel.com/pressroom/archive/releases/20040622corp.htm>