THE CHALLENGE AMONG US
THE EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN MARIN

what MCF is doing to close the gap

it takes a village
closing the education gap  
Dr. Tom Peters  
President and CEO, Marin Community Foundation

This issue of Imagine focuses on a topic that touches everyone—the education of our community’s young people. More specifically, it focuses on one of Marin’s most nagging and troubling ironies: While most students in Marin thrive in school, many others do not.

And those who don’t are often students who come from low-income families and/or are students of color.

Our jobs at MCF, reflected throughout this issue, are multiple: to put a spotlight on this critical subject, encourage and support innovative solutions, enlist broad community support, and highlight the people and programs that are making a difference.

One of the articles is called “It Takes a Village.” That phrase captures the Foundation’s vision for a community in which all students have the opportunity to succeed, and what it takes to get there.

Throughout these pages, you’ll hear the voices of administrators, teachers, parents, students, our donors, community leaders, and MCF staff, who—collectively—are working to create an environment in which a young person’s aspirations become real.

As always, let us know if we can help you make a difference in the lives of young people, or in any other aspect of your charitable giving.
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On a Thursday morning in late July, San Rafael District Superintendent Mike Watenpaugh climbed the staircase to his second-floor office in the district offices adjacent to Terra Linda High School. The only clue that the 12 schools in Watenpaugh’s district were not in session yet was that he was wearing a loose-fitting Hawaiian shirt rather than his customary suit and tie.

In the office, his assistant readied a heavily scheduled calendar for his quick review. Coming up was the monthly session where all of Marin’s 19 district supervisors meet to share innovations and progress on budgeting and equity issues within their schools. There was a new Spanish language class for English-speaking administrators that Watenpaugh was launching. And later in the day, he would gather his fellow administrators for a kick-off meeting on how a coalition of social service nonprofits would partner with the district schools in a College Readiness Partnership, funded by the Marin Community Foundation.

Why all the effort? Because even in a county in which students receive among the highest test scores in the state, Latino and African-American students have scored far lower than their white counterparts in every year since 2003, when math and English testing by grade levels began.

According to Education Trust West, an Oakland-based research organization, the end result of this trend is that children who don’t master such skills as language arts in fourth grade or Algebra I in eighth grade are less likely to enter, let alone complete, the classes offered in high school that are required for admission to the UC or state college systems.

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It is no surprise, then, that this stubborn, ongoing “achievement gap” has caught the attention of Marin educators and policy analysts who are seeking new ways to close the gap.

The need to do this is driven both by a sense of equity—that everyone should have an equal opportunity to succeed—as well as by the economic and social benefits of achieving academically: higher incomes, greater civic participation, and increased family stability. And on a broader scale, closing this gap can lead to economic growth and competitiveness, as well as a workforce trained for 21st-century jobs.

So just what are the connections between the achievement gap in Marin and the roles of poverty, the education and involvement of parents, and the cultures of schools attended by low-income students and students of color?

Dr. Pedro Noguera, author and professor in the Steinhardt School of Education at New York University, has researched the achievement gap in Berkeley, Montgomery County, Maryland; and other districts across the U.S. that share some of the key qualities of Marin—affluent, diverse, and generally liberal politically. He explains that the data collected by the 2001 passage of No Child Left Behind provides hard evidence that background, educational attainment, and income of parents are highly correlated with the academic success of their children.

“The academic proficiency numbers we see in Marin and in other affluent communities across the country are very clear,” says Noguera. “Kids who begin their educational journey in the same classroom, even seated next to each other, are deeply affected by conditions far beyond the classroom. Their success will be influenced by their family’s socio-economic status, their race, and whether or not they are English-language learners.

“Think of the impact that an unemployed but educated parent has on their children,” he says. “Consider what this parent brings to the table—a love of books and reading, the option of tutors or summer camps, an ability to navigate the system and ask for what they need. It is hard to underestimate the array of resources that more affluent children can draw upon.”

Linda Jackson, president of the San Rafael Board of Education, adds that how kids spend time away from the classroom can have a direct impact on their academic success. She cites an essay by Malcolm Gladwell describing the observations of his mother, a teacher, who saw that many of her students lost ground over the summer because they stayed at home, watching TV or playing in the courtyard. “They didn’t have the academically enriching experiences of going to museums, libraries, or summer camp,” says Jackson.

While Noguera and others highlight the important role of parents in their kids’ success in school, educators and nonprofit executives point out another powerful influence:
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the corrosive effect of low expectations by school officials, especially for low-income students and students of color.

Sally Matsuishi, president and CEO of Next Generation Scholars, works with high school students in Marin—many the first in their families to attend college—whose schools don’t always see them in terms of the potential and promise they have.

“Our center has tutored smart kids who were told by counselors not to enroll in advanced placement classes,” says Matsuishi. “But I see parents and kids who are willing to work as hard as possible to fight their way out of poverty. And they need to master the vocabulary of making requests of school administrators.”

And then there’s the role that assumptions about Marin play—assumptions that can hide the economic challenges faced by many families here. As Watenpaugh points out, the achievement gap is hard to see if people assume that everyone in Marin is wealthy. “The high cost of housing in Marin masks the many service industry workers and minimum-wage employees who live here and often have to share one apartment with several families to make ends meet,” he says.

Jackson, of the San Rafael Board of Education, adds, “Parents have asked me how an achievement gap can exist in the midst of all this affluence. But remember, we are an affluent county. Not every neighborhood is affluent.”

Recently, the United Way of the Bay Area created a self-sufficiency index to show just how expensive life is in Marin. For a single parent with one preschooler and one school-age child, the costs of housing, food, transportation, childcare, health care, and taxes come to $68,880. Yet the federal “poverty line” is drawn at annual incomes that fall below $21,834. And in Marin, where 29,615 children attend public school, nearly a quarter—24.8%—qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch.

Income disparities play out another way. Even though many school districts in Marin have free-standing school foundations—which fund everything from academic enrichment programs to arts—these tend to exist in the more affluent districts.

Despite the many challenges Watenpaugh and other educators faces—reduced budgets from state government, an ongoing recession, and the achievement gap itself—he is revved up and optimistic as he heads into the 2010-2011 school year.

“Creating an equitable school district is like building an airplane in midflight,” he says in his booming voice. “We are going to do what it takes to turn every school around, every classroom around. I want every student to know that we support him or her and we believe in them.”

What does Watenpaugh want the rest of us to remember? “That some kids need more to get the same.”
The Gap, by the Numbers

Mary Jane Burke, Marin County Superintendent of Schools, still remembers her surprise when she saw a PowerPoint graph presented by UCLA professor Dr. Julie Mendoza, co-director of the California Opportunity Indicators Project, at a 2005 briefing on academic performance by Marin students.

San Rafael-based Marin Education Fund (now called 10,000 Degrees), Oakland’s Education Trust West, and others sponsored informational events at Book Passage, Marin Academy, and Dominican University of California so that scholars who had drilled deep and crunched the numbers could present their findings to Marin educators.

What they saw were color-coded graph lines revealing how Marin’s white and Asian students between seventh and 11th grade were outperforming African-American and Hispanic/Latino students in English Language Arts. The same gap appeared for eighth- and ninth-grade students tested for Algebra I.

“The gap was so wide you could drive a truck through it,” recalls Sally Matsuiishi, president and CEO of Next Generation Scholars. In fact, the achievement gap between groups of students grouped by race and socio-economic status was greater in Marin County than in the Los Angeles Unified School District and Richmond, CA.

“This data had an important impact in focusing attention on the achievement gap issue in Marin County,” says Burke.

“The single most important thing I learned early on regarding this issue—and something that has motivated me ever since—was the correlation between quality preschool programs and success for all students in school. A tremendous amount of research made it clear this was a vitally important solution for all children, but especially those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.”

In the years since California began collecting the data, the numbers have barely moved.

According to Education Trust West, the 2010 STAR results are still impressive when Marin as a whole is compared to statewide results. But when the numbers are highlighted by racial subgroup, only 51% of fourth-grade African-American students and 53% of fourth-grade Latino students passed English compared with 92% of Marin’s white students. Similar gaps appear on fourth- and eighth-grade math test results. By eleventh grade, the gap increases dramatically: Only 25% of African-American students and 27% of Latinos are judged proficient in English, compared with 73% of white students.

Superintendent Burke recognizes that the latest STAR test results “are a mixed bag.” As she explains, “The results show that our schools are generally doing a very good job with a majority of our students and that some gains have been made with some socio-economically disadvantaged students. That being said, the test results also show that there is much work to do. The results definitely focus our attention and our resolve to address the issue.”
Students at Next Generation Scholars play Bananagrams, a game that teaches the rules of English word construction.

“Sandy, come home...right now.” There was a shaky tone in my mother’s voice I had never heard before. On the walk home, the leaves on the trees seemed to sway in an uncomfortable way. As I opened the door to the kitchen, my brother walked toward me to grab a Kleenex. Something terrible had happened, and I was the last to know.

Before the death of my father, the most important things were long division and climbing to the highest branch. Back then, my mother joined us in the community pool and giggled. Suddenly everything changed.

From that day forward, our survival became dependent upon welfare, food stamps, Medi-Cal and general assistance. When you have so little, what you do have intensifies. I did not have a father, but my four brothers—Huy, Phuoc, Phan, and Viet—taught me how to navigate the world.

At age eighteen Huy became the head of the household. Even when he was diagnosed with cancer, he held me tight and told me everything was going to be ok. He did not know his own fate, but through his act he taught me that our family would always remain strong. Though Phuoc has always isolated himself from the rest of the family, he has always been the most protective of me. In doing so, he showed me how to value myself.

During Huy’s bouts with cancer, Phan stepped up and at 20 years old sacrificed his own education in order to work full time to support all five of us. His sacrifice showed me the value of maturity, responsibility and self sacrifice. Viet is shy and quiet. For more than half of his life, he lived in his little shell, but through hard work he fought all his fears and opened up, reached out and earned admission to a prestigious college. He proved my future belongs to me and only I can face my own challenges.

Today, I use all the strengths my brothers have given me to create my own future. I am active, involved and always looking for new challenges. I always raise my hand. I seek out every opportunity. Through hard work I earned admission to three competitive college access programs: Marin Education Fund’s Summer Application Institute, KRON 4’s Students Rising Above, and Next Generation Scholars.

My brothers put me on my way to a life far greater than the confines of our low-income community. I want to go farther than the traditional expectations of a Vietnamese girl from a fatherless immigrant family. I want to reach up and grab the chance to attend the college of my dreams.

I can’t wait to come home from college and sit over a hot bowl of pho with my brothers. I dream of sharing what it’s like to live in a dorm, work on projects to better reach the Asian community and dance in front of a stadium of people. I know my success will belong to all of us. I can not wait to hear my mom say with pride, “Sandy, welcome home.”
It is the first day of school on a cool August morning in San Rafael’s Canal District. In this predominately Latino neighborhood wedged between the interchange of the 101 and 580 freeways on the west and the Bay waterfront on the east, throngs of mothers and fathers walk their children to Bahia Vista Elementary School.

Prominently displayed on every door is a “No Excuses University!” decal, since this is a public school where the entire staff has received rigorous training on how to create a college-going culture.

Every child, from the youngest kids lining up for Mariela Valderrama’s kindergarten class to the fifth-graders heading upstairs for Derek Lecy’s class, will enter a classroom sponsored by a college. On display will be college banners, school mascots, college sweatshirts, diplomas, transcripts of grades, and even a box that will be stuffed with questions by kids who come from families where no one has ever gone to college.

But for the six-year-olds contemplating Valderrama’s “Go Aggies!” banner and photos of her own children in cap and gown on graduation day from UC Davis, it will likely take more than dedicated classroom teaching for them to achieve the vision of earning a college degree with the class of 2027.

In addition to the schools themselves, it will take the involvement of local nonprofits, public agencies, parents, and volunteers from the community to work with children and their families who are most at risk of seeing their academic success derailed.

In other words, it takes a village to close the county’s education achievement gap.

School-Community Partnerships

Collectively, programs outside of school are helping students both with their academics—by providing tutoring and after-school programs—and with the related but equally important issues of self-esteem, leadership development, and learning about and getting support for college.

As Dr. Pedro Noguera, a professor at the Steinhardt School of Education at New York University who has studied the causes of the achievement gap in affluent suburbs across the country, puts it, “Educators now have irrefutable data that you cannot divorce academic achievement from broader economic issues. You have to understand what’s happening to these kids outside of school.”

At Bahia Vista, that means an onsite Family Center where teachers and administrators collaborate with nonprofits such as Canal Alliance, Parent Services Project,
A peek into Mr. Lecy’s fifth-grade classroom at Bahia Vista Elementary on the first day of school.

the Mentores Program, and others. The center offers family counseling, English-language classes for parents, Raising a Reader preschool training for toddlers, and a Healthy Meals food distribution program.

“We start with the belief that every child here is capable and worthy,” says Juan Rodriguez, principal at Bahia Vista Elementary School. “We want them to know that their success is not based on their economic background. But when issues come up, we work as a team to solve the problem. The school is a one-stop shop for the community,” he says.

Nonprofits Helping Families

Canal Alliance, based in San Rafael’s Canal neighborhood, offers a wide range of community services, including legal assistance, mental health screening, technology training, ESL classes, and citizenship classes.

“We provide a safe place, five days a week, for students to come and do their homework after school,” explains Tom Wilson, executive director of Canal Alliance. “We know these students are living in crowded apartments with multiple families. We know that’s a difficult environment for studying. We offer an alternative.”

Family stability is key to academic success, and programs like Canal Alliance’s Youth Education and Development Program pay attention to the details that can undermine this stability. For example, the parents of the 80 children enrolled in this program also participate in the Alliance’s Family Empowerment program, where social workers and case managers provide counseling and referrals. “When a car breaks down or a member of the family is laid off work, we know about it,” says Wilson.

Local nonprofits also provide critical support for students in the areas of college readiness and scholarships. For example, San Rafael’s 10,000 Degrees (formerly Marin Education Fund), the scholarship arm of MCF, provides academic support, scholarships, and information about college admissions to low-income students and first-generation parents who have not attended college. This past summer, its Summer College Application Program sent 100 high school juniors and seniors to live in dorms at Dominican University of California, tour UC Berkeley and St. Mary’s, and work on their college essays.

“I remember this one young boy who had a low G.P.A.—maybe a 1.0—and who wanted to participate simply because his friend said it would be fun to live in a dorm,” recalls Traci Lanier, 10,000 Degrees’ vice president. “That started him thinking. The next year, he brought his grades up to a 3.0 and applied to 11 colleges. He was accepted at nine, and this year will be graduating from Dominican with a degree in business. His dream is to buy his mother a house. I have no doubt he’ll accomplish that goal.”

At Next Generation Scholars, based in a downtown San Rafael storefront, some 40 middle and high school students get a boost to succeed both academically and as social activists. The program, headed by Sally Matsuishi, offers tutoring, field trips, leadership training, college prep activities, and other programs to help students attend college—many the first in their families to do so.

Oversized photos on the wall show smiling teenagers holding up their college letters of acceptance from such top-flight schools as Bard, Georgetown, Williams, Duke, Columbia, Vassar, and Yale. In the main conference room, students are working on essay writing. There’s even a closet stocked with local donations of school supplies, clothes suitable for job interviews, and prom dresses for the girls.

“Once people in Marin understand there’s a problem, they jump in with both feet to solve it,” says Matsuishi. “That’s part of why I’m optimistic that we’re going to close the achievement gap. Our community is small enough and caring enough that I know it can be done. People should rightly feel proud of how these kids are fighting their way out of poverty.”

At Next Generation Scholars, help for students doesn’t end at high school graduation. It continues through their college years and only ends when they earn their college diploma. “People think that these kids drop out because they’re not smart or they aren’t as motivated,” says Dr. Beverly Matsuishi, a former teacher at Sonoma State University and Next Generation Scholars’ clinical director.

“But really, these kids don’t have a safety net. Oftentimes, they are the only ones in their family with the language skills to help their family through a crisis, unless we find out about it and step in to help.”

Community Support

At Parent Services Project, based in San Rafael, one of its centerpiece programs helps parents learn how to navigate the school system and advocate for their kids’ education. “It’s all about empowering parents to become leaders,” says Jenny Ocon, executive director at PSP. “When it comes to educational reform, so often we hear it’s the job of the schools or the job of the parents,” she says. “But really, it’s the job of the community. It’s all interconnected.”

Or as Traci Lanier of 10,000 Degrees puts it, “Marin is a small enough community that a person can volunteer and get to know these kids individually. People will see that opening the doors of college to all students is achievable. But to be successful and close the gap, we’re going to need each other.”
MCF update

Closing the education achievement gap in Marin

In mid-August, a headline in the Marin Independent Journal was a reminder of a long-standing reality in Marin County. Reporting on the results of this year’s statewide standardized tests, the main headline read: “Marin students outpace state.”

But the sub-head was just as poignant: “Some still struggle.”

“The good news has always been that many students in Marin do exceptionally well in school,” says MCF President Dr. Tom Peters. “But many others—especially low-income students and students of color—are falling behind. They often end up not graduating from high school and not continuing their education, which can have a major impact on their earning potential, civic engagement, and being a model for their own children later on.

“When the Foundation started to develop its 2010-2014 Strategic Plan, it was clear that we needed to focus on closing the education achievement gap in Marin,” he adds.

The result is a Strategic Initiative that will distribute approximately $35 million over five years.

MCF is tackling the achievement gap with a 20-year history of supporting educational efforts in the county, giving it both a solid basis on which to determine its strategies and a firm understanding of the challenges faced by the county’s under-achieving students.

After talking with educational leaders—including local school officials and educators around the country—and visiting model programs, staff and Trustees of the Foundation decided...
to focus on the academic success of students in four school districts in Marin with high concentrations of low-income students and students of color: Sausalito Marin City, San Rafael, Novato, and Shoreline, in West Marin.

The Foundation also committed to several principles that would guide its work:

- To commit to a five-year strategy, in order to track progress over time and make adjustments, if necessary, along the way

- To address the entire educational experience, from pre-K through college

- To support efforts that, if successful, could be implemented more widely in the county

- To work with schools and districts with a strong commitment to change

- To work both within schools and with community groups that help young people—and their families—thrive.

### Early Learning Success

MCF’s support for closing the education achievement gap acknowledges the importance placed on early education, starting pre-K and continuing through the third grade.

“It’s common knowledge that an investment in these early years can have life-long impact,” says Don Jen, MCF’s program director for education. “And even before young children enter school, their parents can do a lot to help them learn—and love to learn.”

As a result, MCF is funding teams of early childhood educators, classroom teachers, parents, and others—within all four districts the Foundation is focusing on—to define expectations for children as they progress from pre-K through third grade, including tracking progress during those years and providing extra time for learning.

Also, parents will be trained to be advocates for their kids—something Jen says is often missing when they are intimidated by the school system or lack English language skills.

### College Readiness

Several afternoons and evenings a week, K-12 students from the Sausalito Marin City School District meet with volunteer tutors to go over homework assignments and get extra help with their studies. The program where this happens—Bridge the Gap College Prep—is an example of how efforts outside of school are helping young people succeed.

“Besides focusing on schools, MCF is also funding community groups that help students attend college and succeed once they’re there,” says Marcia Quiñones, the Foundation’s program officer for education and immigration.

“These agencies already have good relationships with these young people and their families through different kinds of community activities,” she adds. “And besides offering academic help, they focus on such issues as leadership development, self-esteem, and community involvement.”

In addition, the Foundation is funding efforts to help students learn about and access scholarship support. For example, they will benefit from a new effort, the Marin College Access Network, which will coordinate providers and make it easier for students to learn about available help.

“Collectively,” says Peters, “we want to help more students enjoy the many benefits of a college education. It should be something that’s not just aspirational, but attainable.”

### School Transformation

“While no one likes to admit it, there’s often a correlation between students who are falling behind and the quality of schools they attend,” says Peters. “These schools often have fewer resources, a culture of low expectations, less prepared teachers, uninvolved parents, and a lack of strong leadership—all contributing to an entrenched history of low achievement.”

As a result, the Foundation is working closely with schools in the Sausalito Marin City and Novato school districts to tackle these issues, under the notion that true transformation, not a refinement of what they’ve done in the past, is needed to create real change.

“For example, we are funding comprehensive staff training at Loma Verde Elementary School in Novato,” explains Jen, “so teachers can help students move successfully from one grade to the next, teach using data from student assessments, and receive professional development in a variety of subjects.”

“We’re excited to be working not only with individual schools, but also with local community groups, the County Office of Education, and others to help ensure that all students in Marin can succeed,” says Peters. “This is a challenge that can rally the entire community. Everyone benefits.”

Bridge the Gap College Prep’s Haneef Foster with tutor Ajmal Shah. The Marin City program brings together credentialed teachers, volunteer tutors, and mentors to help at-risk kids (K-12) with homework—particularly reading skills and math—so they can pursue a college education.
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From after-school programs to scholarships, and from local schools to ones around the world, donors at the Marin Community Foundation are long-time supporters of education. Quite often, in fact, it’s the primary focus of their charitable giving.

And they’re not alone. In 2009, educational efforts received $40 billion in philanthropic support nationally, representing 13% of all charitable giving (second only to religion, at 33%). And while this amount includes giving from all sources (including private foundations), donations from individuals made up about 75% of all charitable giving last year.

Why education? “Because,” as MCF donor Ann-Eve Hazen puts it, “education is everything. It’s the most important thing. It’s how you raise people.”

Generally, MCF’s donors support education in five ways: college readiness and youth leadership programs, college scholarships, after-school and summer enrichment programs, specific schools and colleges, and efforts to expose young people to career options.

College readiness programs, such as Marin’s Next Generation Scholars and San Francisco’s First Graduate, often combine academic help and test preparation with other kinds of support that prepares young people to attend college. These include encouraging them to be leaders in their communities to address social issues.

Hazen, a Tiburon resident and donor at the Foundation since 2007, started First Graduate 10 years ago, when she saw a need to “get young people while there’s still a chance.” The agency helps some 200 students, starting in sixth grade until they graduate from college. As its name suggests, First Graduate serves students who strive to finish high school and be the first in their families to graduate from college.

“We don’t take the best students,” Hazen adds. “We take ones with terrible grades, and with the help of case managers, tutors, parents, and teachers, they rise above everything.”

The first group of participants will graduate from college next year. “It’s changing people’s lives,” Hazen says.

MCF donors generously provide financial help to students so they can attend college. Besides supporting broad-based scholarship programs, several MCF donors have found a niche that reflects their personal interests and experiences.

Roland and June Minami, residents of San Anselmo and donors at the Foundation since 1996, have done this—twice. June Minami was instrumental, 15 years ago, in starting the Asian Scholarship Fund, which supports Marin students with an Asian heritage to attend college. So far, the fund has helped 150 students. And it had another benefit: “For the very first time,” she says, “all the Asian communities in Marin came together to work for a common purpose.”

The Minamis’ support is not just financial. Roland Minami, a physician, has mentored several scholarship recipients in their medical careers, staying in touch with them through their education and, sometimes, beyond.

“The money part is secondary,” he says. “The value of someone’s getting help to go to school is affirmation that someone believes in them. It’s not just about furthering their education, but building self-esteem.”

The other way the Minamis are helping young people touches on a painful aspect of American history, one that they were swept up in as infants. They, along with their families, were held at internment camps for Japanese Americans during World War II—Roland Minami in Arkansas and June Minami in Colorado.

Both have attended reunions at the sites of these camps, where they were struck by several things: Teachers in those communities were using the existence of the camps as the basis for lessons in human and civil rights, many students in both places were extremely poor, and adults and young people alike greeted the former internees with “kindness and grace,” reports Roland Minami.

After attending these reunions, the Minamis decided to start scholarship programs at both of the local high schools in those communities. “They don’t have anything,” says Roland Minami. “It’s an easy way to help.”

Why such a deep commitment to helping young people attend college? “Both of us received scholarships,” says June Minami. “It’s a miracle someone
we didn’t know supported us to pursue our education.”

With the critical role that after-school and other enrichment programs have in a young person’s education, it’s not surprising that MCF donors are funding these efforts. One example is Bridge the Gap College Prep, which offers one-on-one tutoring to students in Marin City.

MCF donor Ann-Eve Hazen says, “I thought for a long time about what I could do to turn around the lives of poor kids. I felt hopeless for a long time.”

But, she adds, “I believe in mentoring, and I just jumped in.” She’s been supporting Bridge the Gap ever since.

Loyalty to a school someone attended—or that their kids attend—runs deep, and our donors are generous examples of this tradition. But often support goes beyond giving to an annual campaign.

For example, Bob and Shirley Sanderson, graduates of Cal Berkeley and donors at MCF since 2000, initiated a challenge grant program to encourage recent graduates of its College of Engineering to support their school, which Bob Sanderson attended. “The goal is to get new graduates of a public university to start thinking like graduates of a private university, where alumni are expected to provide support,” he explains. “It has been tremendously successful and very gratifying.”

And in Marin, John Allen found an opportunity that connects his loyalty to Dominican University of California (where he has served on the board and as its board chair) to his passion for youth athletics. He is funding the expansion of Dominican’s athletic fields so that besides providing improved facilities for the university, they can also be used by local youth.

Not surprisingly, the project is called the Field of Dreams.

Allen, who opened a donor-advised fund at MCF with his wife, Elizabeth, in 1997, wants to help students who don’t make varsity teams in high school, since he feels they need a place to “expend their youthful energy. I don’t want 15-year-old kids to find out that school’s out at 3, and they don’t have any place to go for the next four hours. I want to grab them before they get to the street corner.

“It’s been inspiring to open my eyes to all the different possibilities here in our community,” says Allen. “It’s so rewarding to be so engaged in my retirement.”

Finally, several donors support programs that expose young people to career options. Larry Brackett, who has had a fund at MCF since 1996, is a strong supporter of the Marin County Office of Education’s School-to-Career Partnership, which Brackett has also co-chaired.

The program pairs students with local businesses so they can be exposed to various jobs. This kind of on-the-job experience allows students to explore potential careers and develop skills required for success in the workplace. And, it helps students make connections between their academic studies and jobs they’re interested in.

“Everyone has an opportunity if they have the motivation,” says Bracket, “and one goal of this program is to provide that motivation.”

MCF donors share a feeling of gratitude for the education and opportunity they received when they were students—and for the value that their own families placed in education.

“While I was privileged to have a fine education, that isn’t the case for many other people,” says Brackett. “Education levels the playing field, socially and economically.”

And Roland Minami puts it this way: “We think of the good life we’ve had after being in prison and living in a garage with no toilet. Only in America can you have a situation like that. It creates a great source of pride to be an American. It makes us feel patriotic about helping out others.”
IMAGINE talked with several new teachers—some just starting their careers—at the start of this school year. Their insights, experiences, and challenges highlight the central role they play in helping young people succeed in school and in life.

Ashley Acquistapace is a second-year teacher of the fifth grade at Brookside School (Upper Campus) in the Ross Valley School District. She was interviewed the day before school started.

How do you feel today compared to last year at this time, when you were just moments away from starting your teaching career?

Even today is different from last year. I’m so much more relaxed. I know what I’m doing, including how I’m setting up my classroom. I know what systems will be in place. I have a picture in my head of how the year will go.

What inspired you to become a teacher?

From a young age, I wanted to be a teacher. I started by teaching dance and swimming. I tried some other things, including office-type work, but I realized I wanted to see the results of my work. Working with kids inspires me every day.

How do you think you’ve changed as a result of being a teacher?

I think about things in the moment when I work with kids, and that has bled into my own life. It’s a great gift the kids have given me. It’s allowed me to not miss those little things that happen—to be really there and be present.

What kinds of classroom activities are you excited about this coming year?

I want to try more author circles, where small groups of students read books by the same author. They help give kids a chance to take ownership of what they’re learning. And the small-group discussions teach them about social interactions.

Vanessa Nuñez is a first-year teacher in the first grade at Laurel Dell School in San Rafael. She was interviewed during the first week of school.

How do you feel today compared to last year at this time, when you were just moments away from starting your teaching career?

Even today is different from last year. I’m so much more relaxed. I know what I’m doing, including how I’m setting up my classroom. I know what systems will be in place. I have a picture in my head of how the year will go.

What inspired you to become a teacher?

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I was no longer volunteering or student teaching. Now I’m the one who’s responsible for these kids academically. It’s a little scary, but with every day I’m feeling more at ease.

Since many of your students speak Spanish at home, how does that affect how you teach?

Not only do 16 out of my 21 students speak Spanish as soon as they leave my classroom, even during recess, but they know that I speak Spanish, so that’s a challenge. My goal is to have them speak only in English, although once in a while if they slip into Spanish, I ask them to try saying it in English.

Now that you’re a teacher, how do you think your life will change?

Right now, my whole entire life is working and planning. These kids are my children.

Casey Shannon is a first-year teacher of 8th-grade English at Davidson Middle School in San Rafael. He was interviewed during the first week of school.

How are things going so far?

So far, so good. I’m getting to know the students. I haven’t taught eighth grade before, so I’m realizing I can’t assume they know a lot about reading and writing. I’m teaching the basics more—teaching them to actively read and write in interesting ways, not writing “cookie-cutter template papers.”

You didn’t immediately become a full-time classroom teacher after college. What else did you do?

I taught English as a second language in Japan for two years. As much as I liked that, I wasn’t sure I wanted to become a teacher, and I wanted to try something that wasn’t academic. So I joined the merchant marines. Then I became an electrician for awhile.
In between jobs I was a substitute teacher. I realized at some point that once I got the adventure out of my system, I wanted to resume the adventure of teaching. I feel I belong in a classroom. I enjoy helping kids more than anything.

\textbf{What’s surprised you so far about teaching full time?}

I see that kids at the age of 13 have to be reminded to do things in very specific ways. For example, I have to tell them when to pull out pen and paper to write things out. You can’t assume they’ll do everything.

\textbf{What’s the first book you’re going to read with your class?}

“The Outsiders” [by S.E. Hinton]. It’s perfect for middle school students, since it addresses issues around social status, which kids worry about a lot. It asks questions like: What makes a person end up a certain way? What makes one group the majority and one an outcast?

**Meagan Druding** is a second-year teacher of kindergarten at Strawberry Point School in Mill Valley. She was interviewed at the end of the first day of school.

**How was your first day this year compared to last year?**

Oh, I have such a feeling of ease this year. I’m not only more mentally prepared, but feel ready to take on challenges more. I can also walk myself through the day in my head and see what it’s going to look like. Even if something happens I didn’t expect, I’ve learned that’s just fine.

**Was teaching your first profession?**

No, I was in sales for a while, but knew in my gut I wanted to be a teacher. I was feeling burnt out in my job, with no opportunities for growth or change. So I felt it was time. I went back to school to get my education degree. It’s been life-changing for me.

*In what ways?*

Besides loving teaching and seeing kids grow, I’ve learned to be a lot more patient and accepting of people, not just the kids. It’s hard not to get caught up in hectic day-to-day life, so it’s nice to come here and see the kids just smile over something I would have just walked past or not seen.

*A lot of teachers were inspired by their own teachers to become one. Were you?*

**Ruben Castro** is a first-year teacher at Novato High School, where he teaches beginning and intermediate Spanish. He was interviewed a few days before school started.

*You didn’t start out as a teacher, so what inspired you to become one?*

It really started when my daughter was born. I was working as an assistant buyer at Federated Department Stores and was laid off. I realized I didn’t want to go back into that kind of industry, and when I had my daughter, I began to pay attention to social issues, including education. That was a real shift for me.

So I decided to go back to school. I got a B.A. in cultural studies from Dominican [University of California]. After that I did some substitute teaching and was really motivated to help students.

*Any anxieties?*

I think it’s inevitable, but I don’t think my anxiety comes from not knowing what to do. It comes more from thinking about so many different things that can happen in class and from knowing there may be issues that are beyond me.

I won’t be the perfect teacher right away. It’s a learning process. I’m the kind of person who likes to help, but sometimes I won’t be able to help everybody 100%.

*What was your own educational experience like?*

I was educated in Mexico, so coming from a different culture, I hope that makes me more open and understanding as a teacher.
MCF donors and their guests gathered at Marin Theatre Company in October for the Foundation’s annual donor thank-you event, where they saw the West Coast premier of “In the Brown & Red Water.”

Left column, top to bottom: Jim Cornett and Corinne Klingbeil; Sydne Bortel, Riese Goldman, and Suzanne Gassner; Ron Collins and Donna Morris; Rose and Brian McCarthy with Ryan Rilette, the play’s director; Terrance and Lois Moore; Michi and Zach Kaplan.

Middle column, top to bottom: Dick Moore, MTC’s Julie Knight, and Michael Moore; Harriet Moss and Ernesto Sanchez.

Right column, top to bottom: Kristen Turek with Elizabeth and Hugh Fullerton; Beverly and Matt Robertson; Mike Cosby, Steve Ramsland, and Dan Daniels.
There are lots of ways that Marin residents volunteer to help students succeed. This list describes a range of opportunities, both within schools and at local nonprofit organizations, where local residents can make a difference in the lives of others.

In addition to the listings below, related volunteer opportunities, such as ones focusing on youth leadership, can be found at [http://volunteermarin.org/volunteer/search.aspx](http://volunteermarin.org/volunteer/search.aspx).

**10,000 Degrees** (formerly Marin Education Fund): This agency, the scholarship arm of the Marin Community Foundation, involves volunteers as mentors to high school students in its Summer Application Institute, a program that assists first-generation high-school juniors and seniors from low-income families by providing them with guidance and information regarding college admission and financial aid. 415.451.4016 or www.10000degrees.org/mentor/index.shtml

**Bridge the Gap College Prep**: Volunteers tutor K-12 students from Marin City one-on-one and in small groups after school and early evenings. 415.810.3137 or www.btgtutoring.org/marin-volunteer-opportunities.htm

**Catholic Charities CYO**: Volunteers at its Canal Family Support Program help at-risk youth ages 6-12 in an after-school program through one-on-one tutoring and group homework activities. 415.972.1233 or http://community.cccyo.org/Page.aspx?pid=371

**Civic Center Volunteers**: Bilingual tutors work with Spanish-speaking students at the county’s Juvenile Hall/Community School to help them learn to read and write in English. 415.499.7407 or www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/HR/ccvol/opngs.cfm

**Community Action Marin**: Volunteers at its Child Development Centers help pre-school and school-age children from low-income working families with their homework, reading, and other activities. 415.526.7522 or http://volunteermarin.org/org/opp/10348089101.html

**Conservation Corps North Bay**: Volunteers help corps members participating in this youth leadership, education, and conservation program with reading, writing, math, and English language skills. 415.454.4554, ext. 152 or www.conservationcorpsnorthbay.org/ccnb/hyc_volunteer_tutor.html

**Experience Corps Marin**: Adults 55 and older work with elementary and middle school students through tutoring one-on-one and in small groups, providing classroom assistance and helping out in after-school programs. 415.464.1767 or www.experiencecorps.org/cities/marin/index.cfm

**Marin County School Volunteers**: Volunteers tutor at-risk students (K-12) in reading, writing, math, and science throughout the county, both in schools and in after-school homework centers. MCSV conducts workshops for volunteers on tutoring skills, social-emotional strategies, and working with English language learners. 415.499.5896 or www.mcsv.org/about.html

**Marin Literacy Program**: Volunteer tutors are matched with Marin residents over 18 who wish to improve their literacy skills. Family programs help adults who in turn are helping their children learn to read. A mobile learning center helps young children prepare for school. 415.485.3500 or www.marinliteracy.org/tut.html

**Marin YMCA**: Volunteer opportunities include helping K-5 students with their homework, and, through its Building Futures program, mentoring young people ages 6-16 to help them with issues such as low self-esteem, family and peer conflicts, academic under-achievement, and decision-making skills. 415.492.9622 or www.ymcasf.org/marin/volunteer

**CYO’s Canal Family Support Program** provides after-school educational support to at-risk youth in San Rafael.
How reaching higher happens.
How changing lives happens.

If you want to help young people thrive in school—even against strong odds—we’re here to help. By working with your personal philanthropic advisor at MCF, you can help young people in ways that reflect your own interests, experiences, and goals.

It’s another way that MCF delivers on its promise to help you make your giving more effective and more satisfying.

Call your advisor today to set up a meeting that could change lives—including yours.