



Photo by Kate Philbrick

Dawn Carrigan:

Advocating for Kids and Creating Community Part of “Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine”

Written by Michaela Cavallaro

Dawn Carrigan always knew she wanted to be a teacher. And she stuck with her dream even as she entered college during a period when pursuing an education degree was discouraged, due to a glut of recent education grads and a dearth of teaching positions. But Carrigan didn't charge ahead naively; instead, she decided to pursue a degree in special education, figuring that the specialized training would improve her chances of finding a job upon graduation. And she was right: After graduating from the University of Southern Maine, she was hired by the Bangor schools to teach a self-contained classroom of emotionally disturbed children from kindergarten through second grade.

As time went on, Carrigan changed jobs relatively frequently: Her then-husband was climbing the corporate ladder, which required their young family to relocate every few years. “I was always changing to adapt to a new school community and a different job,” Carrigan says.

Within the space of a few years, for example, Carrigan taught gifted and talented children in Nashua, New Hampshire; Portuguese-speaking kids in New Bedford, Massachusetts; and middle-schoolers with behavioral issues in Marlton, New Jersey. While the jobs differed, in each one Carrigan's big-picture role was the same: “I became an advocate for a specific population within the overall

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school culture,” she says. “In some school systems my advocacy was appreciated, but in others it wasn’t particularly well received.”

All that changed when the family moved back to Maine in 1989. Carrigan spent five years working in the Scarborough schools—the longest she’d spent in any one district, thanks largely to the leadership of Shirley Grover and Susan Gendron,

who worked in special education there. “Scarborough was state-of-the-art in education, thanks

to Shirley and Susan,” Carrigan says. “Together they really led the movement

for integrating special ed students into mainstream classrooms when it

was appropriate. That

makes all students feel a

part of the school community—

and meets their educational needs.”

Due in part to Grover and Gendron’s influence, Carrigan decided to pursue a career in school administration, which meant heading back to school—while raising two young children and working full-time. At just 31, she’d earned a master’s degree in both special ed administration and general education administration. “I wanted to increase my ability to influence decisions for kids,” she explains. “I was frustrated by taking baby steps.”

In ensuing years, Carrigan held positions as assistant principal at Lyman Moore Middle School in Portland and principal of Harpswell Island School. Being an administrator was challenging, but Carrigan was invigorated by the possibilities—in particular, the opportunity to work with community members. “Nothing can happen in

schools without really strong communities,” Carrigan says. “The culture—in the school and in the larger community—has to be really positive, nurturing and sensitive in order for kids to succeed.”

So it’s no surprise that as principal of Portland’s Longfellow Elementary School for the last nine years, Carrigan has created a vibrant school community, including a strong PTO and a collaborative, team-oriented faculty. “When you walk through the halls, it’s hard to know who’s a teacher and who’s a parent,” Carrigan says proudly.

Still, the role of principal is all consuming—especially when combined with being the single parent of a seven-year-old. (Carrigan’s other children are now ages 24 and 28.) As a result, Carrigan limits her other responsibilities, declining requests to join boards or otherwise assist local nonprofits on the grounds that it would compromise her effectiveness at Longfellow. Being a principal can be a bit isolating, she acknowledges, since the day-to-day interaction with her professional peers is limited. Still, Carrigan wouldn’t change her profession for the world. “The path I took to get here was more complicated than it perhaps had to be, but it brought me strength,” she says.

In her constant quest to strengthen Maine schools, Carrigan encourages professional women across the state to get involved in their local school systems—whether they have kids in the school system or not. “We’re always looking for strong women who can provide a model for girls in terms of achieving your dreams,” she says. “Even if you can give an hour every few weeks, you can make a tremendous difference.”

How are you making a difference? Tell us.

