

Solon Elementary School – School-level Report
Study of Improving Maine Schools
2012 - 2013

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As part of a research study undertaken at the request of the state legislature, the Center for Education Policy, Applied Research, and Evaluation (CEPARE) at University of Southern Maine (USM) and the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) are conducting a study of PK-12 public schools that have been identified as improving. CEPARE is exploring the significant practices and characteristics of improving Maine schools in an effort to identify some practices and attributes that have helped these schools to improve student performance. Several case study schools have agreed to participate in this study, and in return, CEPARE is providing each case study school with a descriptive report of the observations and data gathered during their site visit.

The CEPARE research team is pleased that Solon Elementary School (SES), an improving Maine elementary school, agreed to be part of this important study. The school is part of the RSU 74 and serves approximately 112 students in grades PK-5 from a central Maine community. Approximately 71% of the student population is eligible for free and/or price-reduced lunch, 15% is identified as special education, and none of the students have been identified as English Language Learners.

CEPARE researchers Erika Stump and Lori Gunn visited Solon Elementary School in Solon, Maine on March 4-5, 2013 after speaking with the principal at an earlier date to prepare the schedule and gather additional information regarding the practices and characteristics of SES. In all, the team conducted meetings with teachers, staff, students, and school and district administrators in both interview and focus group settings. Observations were conducted during classroom and non-classroom time. Student and staff handbooks, school and district curriculum documents, newsletters, student work, and school websites were reviewed to help paint a picture of the school as a whole. Researchers obtained additional information from the Maine Department of Education website and from a review of articles in local and regional newspapers over the past three years.

At the outset of the study, CEPARE committed to providing each school with an individualized report of observations from the data collected. Therefore, the following is a *description* of some of the data gathered from the site visit, interviews, classroom observations, and review of documents. These observations are organized into three distinctive features of More Efficient Schools, as referenced in the report, *More Efficient Public Schools in Maine: Learning Communities Building the Foundation of Intellectual Work* (Silvernail et al., 2012). The observations from this site visit are also categorized into two additional areas representing key features found in research literature about improving schools. This report does not provide a complete description of your school, nor of the many programs and activities provided to its students. Rather, it is designed to provide school staff and community a *snapshot* of some of the evidence this school demonstrated in the five areas. At the conclusion of the study, the research team will provide all schools with a cross-site analysis.

This descriptive feedback will hopefully help schools, districts, and communities examine the working practices, programs, and strategies in your school and guide continual improvement for your learning community. While immersed in the daily work of striving to support all students to meet high standards and expectations, it is difficult for any school to stand back and view the interactions between plans, intentions, actions, and results. These individualized observations, which are intended to summarize key and illustrative points of the field research, are communicated to support your school's on-going efforts.

Characteristic #1: Student-focused learning communities in which there is systemic evidence of student and adult Intellectual Work. Intellectual work is demonstrated through three cognitive practices:

1. **Understanding:** focused, sustained and thorough academic (content knowledge and fundamental skills) and social/behavioral (interpersonal relationships, social trends, cultural norms, etc.) learning.
2. **Transformation:** constant inquiry using various reasoning processes and all levels of cognitive thinking to work with information and concepts in order to create innovative solutions.
3. **Sharing:** clear communication of invigorating conclusions that enhance existing ideas.

Research suggests that in More Efficient schools intellectual work may be demonstrated in the following ways through **Student Intellectual Work:** students engaging in academic knowledge and skills as well as social and behavioral learning; and adults implementing instructional practices and curricula that require students to engage in deep learning and improve student performance.

Through our observations, discussions, and exploration of policies and practices at your school, we identified **extensive evidence** of this characteristic. For example:

- *Solon Elementary School demonstrated a collective, habitual school wide focus on learning.* Classroom observations (n=49) reflected very high levels of on-task behavior: 17 observations indicated "all" students were engaged; 26 observations indicated "all but a few" students were engaged; 3 observations indicated "a majority" of students were engaged; and 3 observations indicated that "less than half" of students were engaged. This focus on intellectual work was a prevalent culture throughout the school. Students spent a significant amount of their school day engaged in academic work. As one teacher said, "Nothing interrupts math class. I do not skip math." Another teacher said, "I don't think any of us would choose not to do academics during any free moment of time." However, it was evident that school leaders and educators embraced various types and mediums of learning, such as a K-5 basketball program during school hours in the winter and a weeklong intensive theater experience with the Children Stage Adventure acting troupe. But again, these activities were clearly learning experiences, not just a break from learning. Researchers observed the basketball program, which reflected a highly organized demonstration of fundamental sports skills and coordination as well as team building, school spirit, collaboration, and great fun. Students were also held

accountable and required to demonstrate the process as well as the product of their learning. One teacher said, "You don't do anything for a child that they can do for themselves. We constantly ask, "What have you tried? What do you think you can do?" Another educator said, "There is a common language here, an expectation that we are all, children and adults, learning."

- *Students were engaged in learning tasks that resulted in the demonstration of higher-order thinking skills.* 57% of classroom observations suggested that the learning task required students to include at least some elements of transformation (see definition above), and 27% of observations indicated that transformation was the "prevalent expectation" of the learning task. In addition, students demonstrated at least some element of transformation in their work in 59% of observations. {Note: According to the Center for Authentic Intellectual Work's *Teaching for Authentic Intellectual Work: Standards and Scoring Criteria for Teachers' Tasks, Student Performance and Instruction* (Newmann, King and Carmichael, 2009), the goal for a high quality learning experience is to engage all students in activities which have higher order thinking (i.e. "transformation") as their primary tasks 60% - 100% of their learning time and lower order thinking (i.e. "understanding") 0% - 40% of their learning time.}
- *There was an evident emphasis on reading and literacy.* A strong pre-kindergarten program housed in the school building was "helping build the value and necessity of reading." The library assistant, who provided weekly 40-minute library programs for all grades, indicated that the principal was very supportive of reading. In fact, the school library was in the heart of the school building as an open space in the center of the primary grades and clearly visible from the main entrance of the building. This made books a natural part of the school environment. Researchers observed students casually reading title names of books as they walked by the shelves on their way to other classes throughout the day. A district-wide Literacy Committee was in its 8th year, and literacy was one of the four district focal points. SES was in its fourth year participating in the Maine Content Literacy Project from the University of Maine to supplement work being done in grades 4-5. There was common use of the Six Traits of Writing approach evident in numerous classrooms as well as extended lessons on reading and writing throughout the day. Various samples of high quality student writing were posted throughout the hallways.

Research suggests that in improving schools intellectual work may also be demonstrated in the following ways through **Adult Intellectual Work**: regular, focused professional learning time provided for and used by all classroom practitioners to work collaboratively and independently; professional development focused on instruction and building intellectual capacity; external learning opportunities utilized to develop internal experts.

Through our observations, discussions, and exploration of policies and practices at your school, we identified **considerable evidence** of this characteristic. For example:

- *A collective, collaborative culture of professional learning was evident at Solon Elementary School.* An educator said, "We are all on the same page, maybe a different paragraph but the same page." Another teacher said, "It takes all the teachers in all the grade levels to make the

students better and better." The superintendent indicated, "This faculty has a great skill set. There is strong mutual support." The principal said, "We have a veteran staff that works very well together." This professional work also reportedly included specialists and educational technicians. A teacher indicated that education technicians were often involved in planning lessons and professional development opportunities because they "understand what is expected." Another teacher made it clear that "we respect and value ed. techs." The district-level nurse said, "I feel very much a part of the team. I'm not just an itinerant. I am very involved with [understanding and decreasing] the absentee rate." A collaborative approach to improving practice was evident in our conversations with staff. A teacher said, "When people take classes or attend workshops, it's an unwritten rule that you will present what you learned [to colleagues]." Another educator said, "The staff in this district is always learning." While "the principal is supportive of teachers having planning time," common time was often not officially viable in the daily schedule. However, some teachers suggested that mandatory collaboration would be less authentic than the organic discussions that evolve currently. One teacher said, "The off-the-cuff stuff works the best for us." A special education teacher said, "We share materials. There's a lot of conversation. It's just the climate...You can go into each other's classrooms." In return, a classroom teacher said, "I like to go in and watch what the kids are doing in their special education classes."

- *Professional development opportunities focused on adult learning that directly impacted students.* A teacher said, "A lot of time is spent thinking about what is best for kids." Another teacher indicated, "We are supported if we want to try something, but you have to explain why, and you are encouraged if your reasons are reasonable." This accountability was reported at the district and community level, too. The superintendent said, "We are not complacent...We have expectations: we expect our children to do well, and we expect our school to be doing well by our children." The principal said there was a collective effort to understand and use data, professional learning and research to improve student learning: "It's not just one grade. We tear it apart. Our staff knows how to read the data." An educator said, "Everybody is about moving kids up." This focus on students was also seen in high levels of direct interaction between students and teachers in our classroom observations. Observations (n=49) reflected the teacher roles as follows (note that more than one role may be identified in one observations, so the total may exceed the number of observations): (19) "conferencing," (19) "facilitating," (14) "presenting," (18) "monitoring," and (5) "working independently." As one student noted, "We improve a lot because teachers teach you and you get more educated."

Characteristic #2: Student-focused learning communities in which there is systemic evidence of Equity. Research suggests that in More Efficient schools equity may be demonstrated in the many ways, including: teachers and leaders demonstrating their belief that they have a moral obligation to focus on the intellectual development of students as a means towards a better world; and high standards and high expectations held for all members of the school community.

Through our observations, discussions, and exploration of policies and practices at your school, we identified **extensive evidence** of this characteristic. For example:

- *A common language and consistently high expectations for learning were pervasive in many aspects of the school.* Many classroom teachers had incorporated the Thinkquiry Toolkit content area literacy materials to augment individually developed lessons because "having a common language is huge." Teachers cited numerous practices that exemplified the high value placed on consistency. One teacher said, "We all call the solution to a multiplication problem a product, not an answer." Many educators in SES reflected the belief that students could and should have a sophisticated level of content literacy that involved a common, precise language. Parents were also reported to have a high level of engagement in the learning of all students in the school, with high attendance at school/community functions as well as a strong Parent Teacher Organization that often funded extended learning opportunities (field trips, guest speakers, etc.). Again, this built a common language in families and the community around learning experiences.
- *Solon Elementary School demonstrated a culture of tolerance and respect.* The school's Civil Rights Team, led by students in grades 4-5, had a strong presence in the building. They had put on a play to bring awareness surrounding bias, there were posters throughout the building urging people to "Be an Upstander, not a Bystander." A student said, "Even students who aren't on the Civil Rights Team support us. If we talk to them about something that is hurting someone else's feelings, they be like, 'Yeah, I support what you guys are doing.'" A teacher agreed, "There is student tolerance for difference. Kids would embrace people with differences." Students said teachers were "really good role models" with behavior. Solon Elementary School housed the district's behavioral and severe special needs students and educators, but there was no self-contained classroom. All students were mainstreamed with pullout interventions on an as-needed basis. Researcher observations confirmed that students were consistently respectful, tolerant and inclusive of students with special needs.

Characteristic #3: Student-focused learning communities in which there is systemic evidence of Efficiency. Research suggests that in More Efficient schools efficiency may be demonstrated in the following ways: human and financial resources are used efficiently to maximize learning opportunities for students and staff. For the purpose of this study of improving schools, we did not directly analyze the exact fiscal practices of the school. Rather, we are focusing on how school personnel and systems demonstrate the use of human and other available resources.

Through our observations, discussions, and exploration of policies and practices at your school, we identified **considerable evidence** of this characteristic. For example:

- *There was a prevalent efficiency in the use of instructional time and school day at SES.* As mentioned in an earlier section, high levels of engagement were observed in classrooms. Researchers' also indicated that teachers and support staff were very focused on student learning and the task at hand. Even observations of students working without direct teacher supervision, in small groups or independently, reflected an efficient, productive use of academic time. Observations of non-academic time, such as the in-school basketball program and lunchtime, reflected an organized rhythm to the activity with which students were very

familiar and comfortable. This efficiency was not rigid and allowed for student creativity and individuality but the parameters of the outcome and behavioral expectations were evident throughout the school environment.

- *As a community without substantial financial resources, the Solon Elementary School inspired investment and support for learning opportunities and appeared to use these resources to directly supplement student learning.* Various grants were earned for various technologies. Tandberg audio-visual virtual conferencing equipment was used regularly in classrooms to access virtual field trips, provide district-wide support and access professional learning opportunities. Digital cameras had been purchased for kindergarten, who published a class newsletter with student photos, and fourth grade projects. Fifth grade students had 1:1 laptops. The special education classroom was frequently observed using an ENO interactive whiteboard. Robotics LEGO equipment was incorporated into fourth and fifth grade technology curriculum. A local bank funded the pre-school screening events through a college and career-readiness program. In addition to external grants, the local PTO was very active (held numerous fundraising events that also provided community engagement in the school) and supportive. As one parent said, "The slimmer we get [in the district budget], the more we pitch in."

Characteristic #4: A visible change symbolizes significant and sustained reform within the school. Research suggests that in improving schools this may be demonstrated in the following ways: "quick wins" within the first few months of initiating reform efforts to represent action and sincerity to the school community and the community at large; positive, consistent public relations with community; and a clear message that the school's role is to "support education" not be the "sole source of education" within the community.

Through our observations, discussions, and exploration of policies and practices at your school, we identified **some evidence** of this characteristic. For example:

- Solon Elementary School was a bit atypical in this study since it was also a higher performing school that had demonstrated academic success throughout the time frame of our specific quantitative data analysis. Therefore, it appeared the "visible change" might have occurred some time ago, although improved student success had continued through 2006-2010 as well. However, school staff and community members reported that *there had been a very distinct shift approximately 15-20 years ago to "slowly rebuild" a positive perception of the school in the community and within the school culture, and in 1981 a new school was built.* The building was beautifully maintained, and the design provided much open space, natural light, spaces for student work display, and collaborative work common spaces. At the time of our case study site visit, the school had very clearly developed a strong foundation of a positive culture and enthusiastic parent and community involvement as well. The superintendent said that the community and school board were supportive and "expect [leadership] to have done your research, advise us...but they believe they are part of the solution." The superintendent said, "Parents and community identify with the school." A school staff member remarked, "I couldn't believe the amount of participation by parents. There is a very active, supportive PTO." Parents cited, "It's easy to be involved;" "People who are able to be involved, love to be

involved."

- More recently, various visible changes have occurred as well:
 - 2004 - District re-configuration: Solon Elementary School changed from a K-8 to a K-5 school, with some embedded staffing changes.
 - 2009 - SES joined Maine Content Literacy Project.
 - 2009 - pre-school program was integrated into the school.
 - 2010 - current superintendent, who was previously the high school principal in the district, was hired.

Characteristic #5: Focused, effective leaders throughout the school and district guide improvement. Research suggests that in improving schools this may be demonstrated in the following ways: leadership, students and other adults in the school community are focused on learning; building administrator's role is to lead instruction, not just manage the school; school leaders initiate progress then collaborate to sustain improvement; open and explicit feedback and evaluation is conducted constantly.

Through our observations, discussions, and exploration of policies and practices at your school, we identified **extensive evidence** of this characteristic. For example:

- *"Our principal...is the guiding force."* The current principal was hired in 1994. A teacher said, "She's always looking for ways for us to improve and get the most out of what we are doing..." The principal was described by staff as "very knowledgeable," "clear about expectations," and "organized." She was also the chair of the "very active" Literacy Committee, which staff said "was the place to go...if you have literacy questions." Teachers indicated her leadership style was well-balanced, "She likes things done just so" but is also "gentle and diplomatic in her approach...always has time to listen...she's going to help you problem solve." Another educator said, "As long as we've done our research and know that what we're doing is research-backed, she is very supportive." Staff indicated that she recognized successes as well: "When you've completed a class, [she] always celebrates it;" "Or when one of us receives a grant, she acknowledges it." A teacher said, "Our leader is very focused, tells her staff everything that is going on. She has very high expectations, and we in turn, try to do the same. We're very lucky we have someone of integrity leading us." Staff members indicated that she will "attend every IEP [and PTO] meeting because she wants to get to know all the families...she knows the kids." Parents described her as "wonderful," "dynamic," and "definitely a part of how it all weaves together."
- *School staff demonstrated the capacity for shared leadership.* This was especially obvious in our site visit since the district had recently designated the principal as school leader for all three elementary schools in the district, each located on separate campuses. Therefore, she was present in the SES building for only one of the two days of our visit. However, the school had established protocols, personnel roles and the ability to demonstrate leadership throughout the staff in a way that made her absence non-disruptive to the school day and student learning. One teacher said, "We're all encouraged to be leaders. Each of us takes a

leadership role at some point." A district staff member said, "[The principal] is inspiring. She inspires teachers to do their very best." A teacher said, "[Our principal] doesn't really tell us what to do. She has confidence that we're going to go and research what works best for us."

Conclusions

Many wonderful practices were evident during our visit to Solon Elementary School. In the research literature, some common distinguishing characteristics of Improving Schools include: visible change; focused, effective leadership; thorough, sustained professional learning, and a school focus of both student and adult learning. The research also identified key elements for sustaining successful school improvement, including: common language and vision; interventions for underperforming and excelling students; data analysis; sustained, dedicated resources; intellectual capacity; and district-level support. Solon Elementary School exhibited characteristics and elements of an Improving School during our two-day visit and in our review of documents, interviews, classroom observations, focus groups, and conversations. The strongest and most pervasive of these attributes included:

- *Strong school and district leadership with high expectations for students and staff.*
- *Collective accountability among leadership, educators, families and the community for student learning and achievement.*

More Efficient Schools, as defined in the first phase of this multi-year study, are student-focused learning communities in which there is systemic evidence of **intellectual work**, **equity**, and **efficiency**. Solon Elementary School exhibited features of More Efficient Schools during our one-day visit and in our review of documents, interviews, classroom observations, focus groups, and conversations. The strongest and most pervasive of these attributes included:

- *Pervasive school culture focused on a well-balanced approach to learning and intellectual engagement.*
- *A moral obligation to empower students and enhance their lives through learning, tolerance and high expectations.*

These were the observations made during the course of the CEPARE school visit and document review, and there are undoubtedly more strengths present in your school that the team did not get a chance to experience. However, the identification of these characteristics may help your school continue the on-going work to educate your community's children.

A Final Word of Thanks and Next Steps

Visiting schools and getting a chance to experience the wonder of what takes place every day for Maine's children is both an honor and a privilege. We appreciate the extreme generosity of the staff, students, and parents at Solon Elementary School. We learned a great deal about your school. Your willingness to share stories, open your classrooms to our observations, and help us to see how your school works greatly enhanced the process of this study. The summaries and examples provided above are just a sampling of all we saw and heard. If you have questions about the report, feel free to connect with Erika Stump or CEPARE director, David Silvernail.

We will continue our school visits across the state, then the research team at CEPARE will conduct a cross-case analysis of all schools in our study to identify common key practices and characteristics of Maine's improving high schools. Our hope is that this work will support policy makers, practitioners, parents, and communities in collective efforts to improve educational outcomes for Maine's students.

Thank you for all of your efforts on behalf of Maine's most important resource,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Erika Stump". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lori Moran Gunn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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