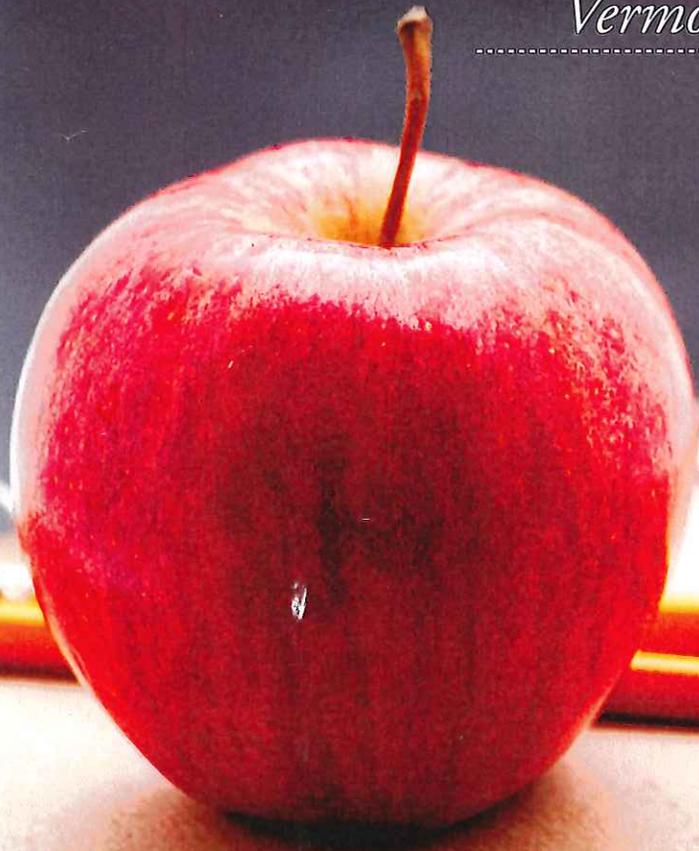


Roots *of* Success

Effective Practices In
Vermont Schools



on measurable, achievable outcomes and cautioned against jumping on bandwagons. Leaders determined what programs, initiatives, or reforms held the best promise for improving student outcomes and committed fully to them. The principal of Pine Tree School described it this way. "I am really big on not jumping on every bandwagon. I can only ask those teachers to do so many things. I've got to prioritize...what we need. I really believe you can only do so many things well and I want to teach reading and math and the other subjects really well." The supervisory union/district curriculum coordinator noted that Pine Tree School is "good at not taking on too much. They have a vision, they have a focus. And everyone's doing it and it's not too much."

Special educators at Maple School also mentioned their principal's aversion to fads. "If we have an idea, he's very willing to let us try. If he thinks you're wrong, he's going to tell you so. He's not (going to jump on) bandwagons." The principal explained his thinking. "My job is to make sure (we have) that focus—kids learning. Make sure that's always clear, always clear. There are a lot of distractions out there and (I have) to sift through those distractions. There are a lot of good ideas out there. That doesn't mean we're going to do them all. We can't. So which ones are going to work here? What are the ones we want to invest our time in?"

And these principals guaranteed that if they decided to implement a particular initiative or program, everyone on staff had the opportunity to receive professional development. When these leaders committed to something, they placed their entire professional weight behind the effort. The principal of Maple School explained, "If we're going to invest time in something, then it's going to happen. We're not going to go do something because it's nice to do. If we need training in something, we'll get training in it but then you've got to do something with it." Second grade teachers at Spruce School echoed this saying that the "principal ensures that everyone gets trained in new programs so (we're) all on the same page." A special educator agreed. "(When) we take professional development, we all do it. There's that expectation that all (who) have teaching responsibilities for these children, (will) take the same professional development."

Creating a positive school climate

A positive, supportive climate is one of the primary explanations many staff members offered for their school's overall success. This factor will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections. The reason it is included here, as well, is because leaders were very deliberate in their efforts to create such an environment. So much so, in fact, that staff rarely discussed the climate of the school without mentioning the principal's role in cultivating it.

Fifth grade teachers at Spruce School commented that, "What has really worked in this school is (creating) a sense of community from the principal down and the feeling of support that

we've had to try to make things work." A special educator at the school agreed saying that the principal "really promotes working together. He cares about the staff and his students and that's conveyed and we feel that. We care about each other." Another special educator shared that the principal and the sense of community he has built in the school is what attracted her to working there. "He really has so many strong skills that bring people together. It's one of the reasons I came to this school because it's known that he's really positive and it helps to maintain and build that community." The school nurse at Spruce added, "He has such a positive culture and he has cultivated...mutual respect and communication. Let's say we have a problem with another staff member. The first words out of his mouth will be: have you talked with the other staff member? I think it's that culture that he has established." The principal of Pine Tree School discussed the intangibility of community and how she felt that, in some ways, our site visit would not be able to capture it adequately. "It will not show the ways in which we act like family, not coworkers. It won't show that we trust each other enough to disagree professionally sometimes but still be just as good friends afterwards. This process won't be able to capture those intangibles that make us who we are and that foster the total sense of community that exists in everything our school does."

It seems that these principals have been successful in establishing a strong, supportive school culture, in part, because they have had time to do so. All three principals have served in their positions for several years. The principal of Pine Tree School has had the shortest tenure at her school at eight years. The principal of Maple School has held his post for 17 years and the principal of Spruce School for 22 years. Staff mentioned the longevity of leadership as a key factor in creating a sense of community and stability. Sixth grade teachers at Maple School commented that, "One of the best things about (our school) is the stability both in staff and in administration. For these schools that have a new principal every two or three years, that is totally disruptive. It's almost impossible to get anything done as a faculty so it's been a real benefit that we have such stability in our administration." First grade teachers at Spruce School mentioned the longevity of their principal's tenure, as well, but noted that it has not held him back from staying up-to-date with new information. They said, "He's been willing, for someone who's been here a long time too, to move forward with new things. He seems very current when we talk to him about new articles, new things that are out there."

Hiring, supervision, and evaluation

Another key function all three principals prioritized was assembling the right staff. These principals recognized the significance of the hiring process and, as a result, seemed to take the responsibility very seriously. These leaders mentioned the importance of