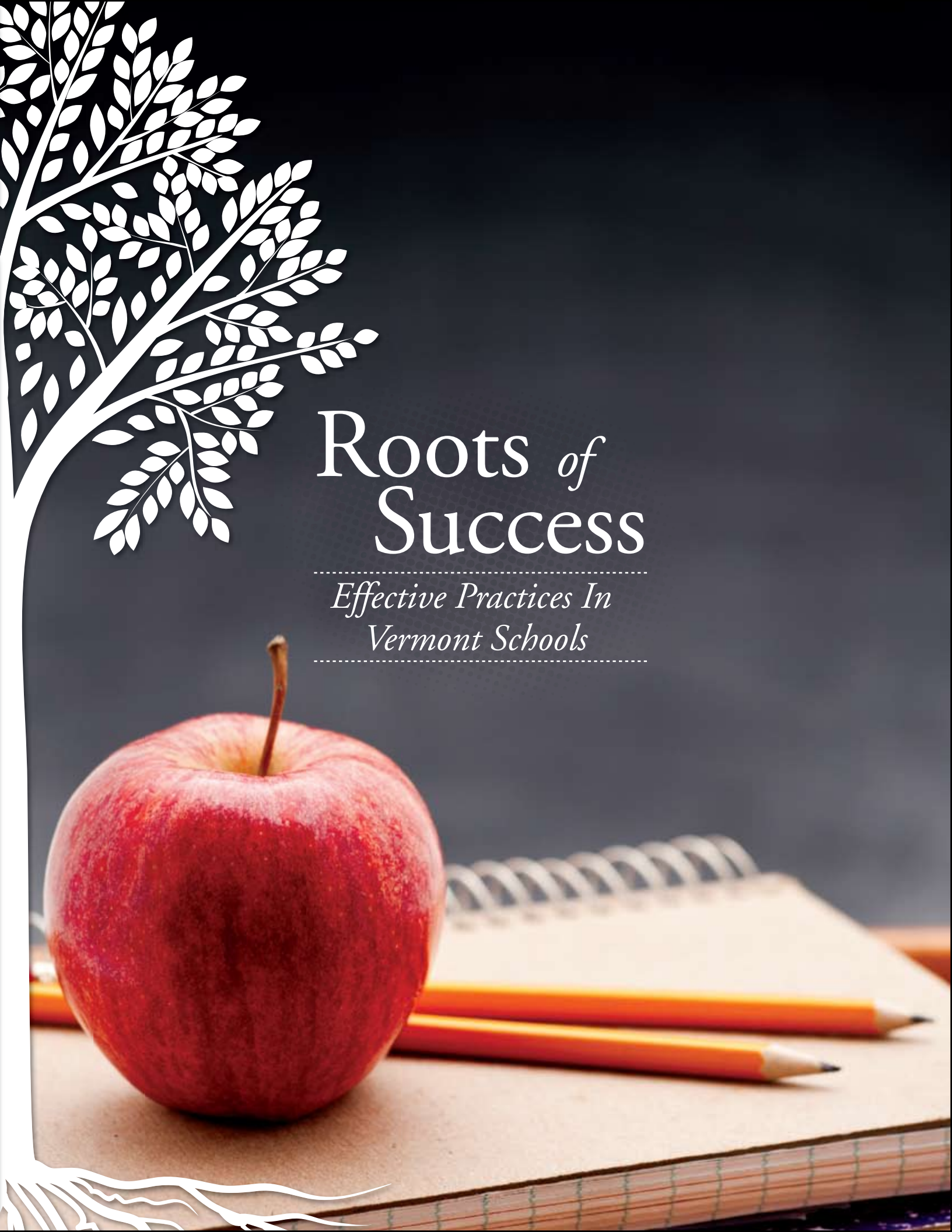

Roots *of* Success

Effective Practices In Vermont Schools

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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VERMONT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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October 2009

Dear Reader,

I want to thank all of the many Vermont schools, administrators, and teachers who made this study possible. Over 2,000 educators provided invaluable insight into what helps schools—and therefore students—succeed via a large-scale teacher survey. In addition, three particularly effective schools acted as case study sites and invited a research team to visit and interview almost every adult in their system. Finally, an impressive cadre of representatives from K-12 and higher education served as advisory members to the project. It is the collective energy, passion, and dedication that produced the important findings included in the following pages.

For years, we have all been asking the same question: What does it really take to help every child, particularly those from impoverished backgrounds, succeed? We now have an answer, one that is based in the *Vermont* school experience, not some far-off school or district in another time zone.

What educators and administrators from across the state told us loudly and clearly is that "what works" is not a particular program or strategy. Rather, success is the result of a highly functioning education system, a fusion of attitudes and beliefs, leadership, and specific best practices. Schools must build their education system on the bedrock of high expectations—we can no longer accept that some students can't or won't learn. Leaders must dedicate themselves to making those high expectations a reality by relentlessly pursuing school improvement. Schools must strive to implement a web of best practices that support student achievement, including the use of data to monitor students and inform school- and classroom-level decisions, a professional teaching culture that encourages staff collaboration, a support system that addresses students' academic and emotional/behavioral needs, a positive school climate that makes everyone feel safe and valued, and constructive relationships with parents. In addition, the schools we visited benefited from important community-based resources. To close the achievement gap, it is vital that the education sector and social service agencies work collaboratively and creatively to provide the range of supports children and their families require.

None of these findings are new or groundbreaking. In fact, they support the large body of national research that already exists on effective schools. What makes this work unique is that we turned to members of our own community to affirm what other studies have been telling us for years—it is possible to reach all children, regardless of background. Our charge is to listen to the stories and lessons of Vermont educators and administrators and commit to the hard work of implementing these findings in all of our schools. As the first sentence of the report says, demographics are not destiny…unless we allow them to be.

I encourage you to explore the report's Web site (www.rootsofsuccess.wordpress.com) for additional resources and to share your feedback with us. I look forward to hearing your thoughts and, again, thank those of you who contributed to this work.

Armando Vilaseca
Vermont Commissioner of Education

VERMONT

October 2009

Dear Reader,

It isn't about money, class size, or the use of the latest, sure-fire commercial materials. And it isn't about No Child Left Behind, Special Education, or Title 1 regulations, either. It's about Vermont kids, Vermont teachers, and the results they've been getting on four years worth of an assessment that we know: the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) tests.

Vermont Department of Education personnel with the assistance of an advisory panel comprised of teachers, curriculum coordinators, principals, a superintendent, and representatives from higher education used the Department's data analysis horsepower to find Vermont schools where students living in poverty were—in the face of state and nationwide trends to the contrary—performing well on the NECAP assessment. Together, we designed a study intended to help all Vermont educators extend these success stories to all Vermont students.

Based on over 60 hours of transcribed interviews with Vermont school personnel, survey results from more than 2000 Vermont teachers, and sophisticated analysis of four years of the grade 3-8 NECAP tests in reading and mathematics this study is meant to show Vermonters—and Vermont's educators, especially—how some schools have figured out what it takes to buck the disturbing trend of underperformance by kids from poor families.

Almost all teachers want their students to succeed, or hope that they will. But the teachers in this study go beyond that. They *expect* their students to succeed, and take very personal responsibility for seeing to it that they do. It may be that this level of expectation and responsibility are among the fundamental elements of practice that can engage students and overcome the lack of motivation or effort so often cited among the reasons why students from poor families do less well in school. It's not our position that disengaged and unmotivated teachers create students with those traits, but that teachers who are engaged, motivated, and committed to the success of all their students can reach them.

Unlike many research studies in education, this one tells a simple story of kids we know, their relentlessly caring teachers, and the supportive principals, school boards, and central office administrators who are their colleagues. It's a story told by teachers, parents, school board members and other school personnel who know what's going on and why.

We've all read or heard about the school improvement studies by researchers like Douglas Reeves, Robert Marzano, or Mike Schmoker. And many of us—convinced by their arguments—adopted versions of their findings in our Vermont settings. But those findings—often based on large, urban districts, and using unnamed achievement testing tools—never had quite the authority that this one does.

We hope the findings in this study influence the practice of all Vermont teachers. It offers a hopeful and positive direction. It affirms the power and importance of teaching
in the life of every child, because it says that what happens in schools can compensate for what hasn't happened elsewhere in a child's life.

Sincerely,

Otho Thompson

Otho Thompson
Former Vermont principal and member of the study's advisory panel

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Internal Factors Associated with School Success

External Factors Associated with School Success

Conclusion

Introduction

Demographics are not destiny

It's true. While research has established the strong link between students' socioeconomic status and achievement, a school's demographic profile does not necessarily predict performance. In fact, there are examples of schools across the country whose students excel academically even though many of them come from low-income families. The challenge to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners is to identify such success stories, learn from them, and establish similar systems in other schools. What makes these schools more successful than others, particularly with students from low-income backgrounds? How did they beat the odds with children who are more likely to struggle than their advantaged peers? How can we help other schools improve outcomes for students?

Fortunately such success stories are not only evident across the country but right here in our own backyard. The Vermont Department of Education, with the help of an advisory panel representing K-12 schools and higher education, studied what it takes for schools—and therefore students—to succeed **(SEE FIGURE 1)**. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was employed to identify the characteristics common to effective schools. Through a large-scale survey of more than 2000 Vermont teachers in 87 schools across the state as well as intensive site visits to three schools that are "beating the odds" (schools whose Reading and Mathematics scores on state assessments defy expectations and exceed those of other schools with similar demographics), we discovered a set of attitudes and beliefs as well as specific school practices that are associated with student, particularly low-income, success. These characteristics form the foundation for school effectiveness and are essential to ensuring that all children, regardless of background or socioeconomic status, reach their full potential.

EIGHT CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS:

1. The belief that all students can succeed
2. The belief that school staff are ultimately responsible for students' success and must therefore continually improve their practice
3. Effective school leadership that helps translate these beliefs into practice
4. Ongoing use of data to provide feedback to staff as well as monitor and support students
5. A professional teaching culture that supports high-quality instruction and is characterized by staff collaboration, trust among staff members, strong staff commitment and dedication, and effective paraprofessionals
6. A comprehensive and highly functioning support system for students who struggle academically, emotionally, behaviorally, or socially, including early intervention programs
7. A supportive school climate that makes all students, as well as adults, feel valued and safe
8. A commitment to building constructive relationships with families and involving them in their child's learning

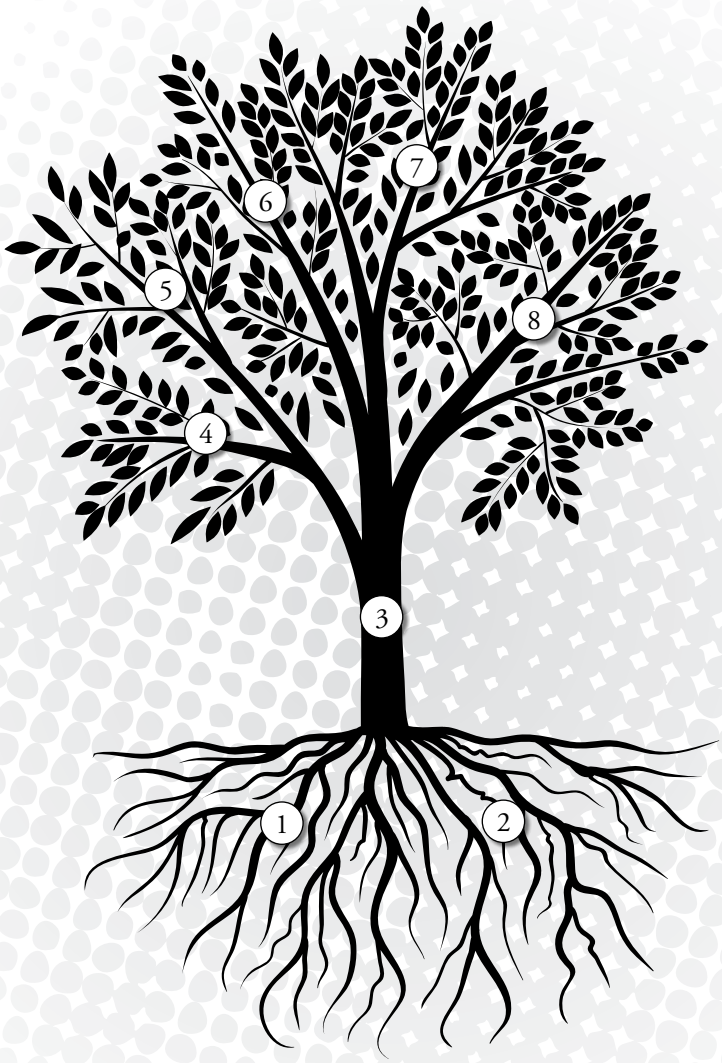
FIG. 1

In addition to these core characteristics, the effective schools studied also benefited from two distinct types of external resources: supervisory union/district office and local school board support as well as assistance from the larger community.

The results of this study do not differ from the large body of national research on effective schools (for a full literature review see www.rootsofsuccess.wordpress.com). However, the value of this work is that it confirms the existing body of knowledge on effective schools but applies it to a Vermont context. We now have state-specific information, aligned to national research, on how to improve outcomes for students. And perhaps more importantly, we have a chorus of Vermont teacher, administrator, and parent voices telling us what it takes to meet the needs of all students.

Overwhelmingly, what their experience teaches us is that **schools matter**. While student characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, undeniably affect academic achievement, our survey and site visit findings demonstrate that schools are capable of altering that relationship through the development of an effective, cohesive, responsive *education system*. Not only must we hold students to high expectations, we must hold ourselves to the creation of effective educational systems that support students to meet these high expectations in each of our schools. ▲

i For more information on this report, visit www.rootsofsuccess.wordpress.com



1 High expectations

Effective systems believe that all students can succeed.

2 Continuous improvement

Effective systems take responsibility for students' achievement and therefore work to continually improve their own practice.

3 Leadership

Effective systems are guided by strong leadership.

4 Use of data

Effective systems use data in an ongoing way to provide feedback to staff as well as monitor and support students.

5 Professional teaching culture

Effective systems establish a professional teaching culture that supports high-quality instruction.

6 Student supports

Effective systems have a comprehensive and highly functioning support system in place to address students' academic, emotional, behavioral, and social needs.

7 School climate

Effective systems create a supportive climate that makes all students, as well as adults, feel valued and safe.

8 Family engagement

Effective systems build constructive relationships with families and involve them in their child's learning.

Summary of Findings

Internal and External Factors

Internal Factors

1. Effective systems believe that all students can succeed.

- **1.1.** Every child, regardless of socioeconomic background, is held to high standards.
- **1.2.** Poverty is never used as an excuse for low student performance.
- **1.3.** Staff have realistic understandings about the challenges of life in poverty.
- **1.4.** Teacher candidates' beliefs about student potential are considered when making hiring decisions.
- **1.5.** Student supports are not based on socioeconomic status; the needs of all students are addressed, regardless of subgroup category.
- **1.6.** Staff strives to give students a vision for the future and help them see beyond high school.

2. Effective systems take responsibility for students' achievement and therefore work to continually improve their own practice.

- **2.1.** Staff feels responsible for students' success and failure.
- **2.2.** Staff are committed to ensuring that all students excel.
- **2.3.** There is a school-wide culture of continuous improvement; entire staff are always asking, "How can we do better?"
- **2.4.** Staff are never satisfied with the status quo.

3. Effective systems are guided by strong leadership.

- **3.1.** Effective leaders are compassionate and supportive of staff, both professionally and personally.
- **3.2.** Effective leaders are accessible, visible, and approachable.
- **3.3.** Effective leaders prioritize three primary responsibilities: setting a vision for the school; creating a safe, positive school climate; and hiring, supervising, and evaluating staff.
- **3.4.** Effective leaders set visions that are measurable and attainable. They do not jump on bandwagons.
- **3.5** Effective leaders hold tightly to their vision but allow staff flexibility in determining how best to achieve it.
- **3.6.** Effective leaders ensure that all staff have access to the training and professional development required to implement any reform or initiative.
- **3.7.** Effective leaders build a sense of community in their buildings and stay in their positions long enough to create a stable school culture.
- **3.8.** Effective leaders recognize the criticalness of hiring the right people and implement hiring practices that fully and effectively screen candidates.
- **3.9.** Effective leaders conduct frequent classroom observations and/or hire coaches who provide teachers with feedback on their instruction.
- **3.10.** Effective leaders use a formal teacher evaluation system to identify teacher weaknesses, support improvement, and remove ineffective staff when necessary.

4. Effective systems use data in an ongoing way to provide feedback to staff as well as monitor and support students.

- **4.1.** Staff collect and analyze data, at the building and classroom level, to continually refine their practice.
- **4.2.** Faculty engages in analysis of results from school-wide assessments like NECAP to determine where they need to improve.
- **4.3.** Schools take specific actions (including changes to curriculum and instruction) based on what they learn from data analysis.
- **4.4.** Students are provided optimal testing conditions for the NECAP including appropriate accommodations. Instructional decisions made by teachers at the classroom level are data-driven.
- **4.5.** Teachers assess continuously and formatively to inform their instruction.
- **4.6.** Teachers assess to guide decisions about student groupings as well as to identify appropriate interventions (both for students who struggle and those who need enrichment).
- **4.7.** Teachers use a variety of assessment strategies and approaches to address a range of student learning styles.
- **4.8.** Instruction and classroom assessments are fully aligned to the state standards (Grade Expectations).

5. Effective systems establish a professional teach ing culture that supports high-quality instruction.

- **5.1.** Staff are dedicated to their jobs and do whatever it takes to meet the needs of students.
- **5.2.** Teachers respect and trust one another.
- **5.3.** Teachers do not work in isolation but collaborate regularly to share instructional strategies and refine their practice.
- **5.4.** Formal structures, like extended time in the school day, are provided for teachers to collaborate.
- **5.5.** Teachers seek out time informally, such as the lunch hour or after school, to work together.
- **5.6.** Teachers observe each others' classrooms and offer feedback and advice.
- **5.7.** Teachers align their curriculum and instruction vertically and horizontally (within grades and across grades) to ensure there are no gaps in skills or content.
- **5.8.** Teachers use consistent terminology and language across classrooms and grades so that students are not confused.

5.9. Paraprofessionals are highly trained and given access to the same professional development and resources as classroom teachers.
5.10. Schools use paraprofessionals strategically to support students and teachers.

6. Effective systems have a comprehensive and highly functioning support system in place to address students' academic, emotional, behavioral, and social needs.

6.1. Schools prioritize students' academic needs but recognize it is also necessary to address' other needs (emotional, social, physical).
6.2. Educational Support Teams (ESTs) have clearly established norms, roles, and responsibilities.
6.3. ESTs respond quickly and thoroughly to any identified student need.
6.4. Schools stress early literacy skills and have a variety of early interventions to detect and support young students who struggle.
6.5. Schools understand the importance of early educational experi ences and either offer pre-kindergarten or are considering offering it in the future.
6.6. Schools extend students' learning opportunities through after school and summer school programs.
6.7. After school and summer school programs include a mix of academic support (e.g. homework help) as well as general enrichment activities.
6.8. Schools establish a safe place for children with emotional or behavioral problems to go during the day to process with the help of professionals.
6.9. Schools hire a cadre of support professionals to work with students and families.
6.10. Students are provided access to healthy and nutritious food throughout the day, including before, during, and after school.

7. Effective systems create a supportive climate that makes all students, as well as adults, feel valued and safe.

7.1. The culture of the school is caring and supportive.
7.2. Students feel safe, protected, and secure at school and have trusting relationships with adults.
7.3. Schools are clear in their behavioral expectations for students and consistent in their response to infractions.
7.4. Teachers work to build community in their classrooms (e.g. through programs like Responsive Classroom®).
7.5. The school's positive climate attracts and retains teachers.

8. Effective systems build constructive relationships with families and involve them in their child's learning.

8.1. Schools believe it is their responsibility to engage parents in their child's learning and publicly state their commitment to involving families.
8.2. Parents are seen as partners with the school in their child's education.
8.3. Schools make their building a welcoming place for families and reach out with empathy and compassion to all parents, paying particular attention to the needs of low-income families.
8.4. Schools hire liaisons (e.g. a home-school coordinator) to engage families, communicate information and volunteer opportunities, make home visits, and provide other support as needed like transportation to/from meetings.
8.5. Teachers regularly communicate with parents about classroom activities and their child's progress using a variety of communication strategies (e.g. newsletters, email, phone calls, and homework folders).
8.6. Parents are provided multiple opportunities and venues to be involved in school activities.

External Factors

Effective systems receive support from their supervisory union/district office and local school board.

a. The supervisory union/district office supports schools to align their curriculum, instruction, and assessment with the state standards (Grade Expectations).
b. The supervisory union/district office provides resources and support for the development of such tools as aligned curriculum guidance, common assessments, and standards-based report cards.
c. The supervisory union/district office provides needs-based professional development to teachers.
d. The supervisory union/district office researches and chooses a teacher evaluation model for administrators.
e. School boards are supportive and child-centered.
f. School boards trust the professional expertise of staff and do not try to micro-manage school activities.
g. School boards do not advocate for particular agendas.

Effective systems actively reach out to their communities and benefit, in return, from community support and resources.

a. Schools have a positive relationship with their surrounding community.
b. Schools actively reach out to their community and serve as a hub for community activities.
c. Towns are supportive of education and consistently pass school budgets.
d. Families, particularly those living below the poverty line, depend on community-based resources such as health services, food shelves, and mental health facilities. ▲

Teacher Survey Results

As part of this study, the Vermont Department of Education was interested in determining the school characteristics associated with high student performance and whether effective schools truly look different from less effective schools. With support from the University of Vermont and the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement in Washington, D.C., we developed a survey instrument to gauge teachers' perceptions of their school on seven different dimensions national research has identified as common to successful, high-poverty schools (see Table 1 below). In total, the survey included over 60 questions related to the seven themes. Table 1 includes a crosswalk linking each theme explored on the survey to our overall findings. A full copy of the survey instrument as well as a review of the national research used to develop it is available on the study website (www.rootsofsuccess.wordpress.com).

All schools in the state with at or above the state average for poverty (29 percent) and at or above the state average for grade size (19 students) were invited to take part in the survey. Out of 91 schools that met both these criteria, 87 agreed to participate. The online survey was administered to teachers, including special educators. Administrators and paraprofessionals did not take part. In the end, more than 2000 Vermont teachers completed the survey, representing a response rate of over 83 percent.

Teachers were asked to rate their school on these seven themes. Teachers' ratings were then matched to their school's Reading and Mathematics scores on Vermont's state assessment (the New England Common Assessment Program or NECAP) to see if schools with a better performance track record looked different, according to their teachers, than schools with lower achievement.

TABLE 1: RELATIONSHIP OF SURVEY THEMES TO OVERALL FINDINGS

SURVEY THEME	CONNECTION TO OVERALL FINDING
Focus on student achievement	Finding 2: Effective systems take responsibility for students' academic achievement and therefore work to continually improve their own practice.
Frequent assessment of student progress	Finding 4: Effective systems use data in an ongoing way to provide feedback to staff as well as monitor and support students.
Support for struggling students	Finding 6: Effective systems have a comprehensive and highly functioning support system in place to address students' academic, emotional, behavioral, and social needs. Finding 7: Effective systems create a supportive climate that makes all students, as well as adults, feel valued and safe.
Staff collaboration	Finding 5: Effective systems establish a professional teaching culture that supports high-quality instruction. Finding 7: Effective systems create a supportive climate that makes all students, as well as adults, feel valued and safe.
High expectations for all students	Finding 1: Effective systems believe that all students can succeed.
Effective school leadership	Finding 3: Effective systems are guided by strong leadership.
Parental involvement	Finding 8: Effective schools build constructive relationships with families and involve them in their child's learning.

FINDING 1: EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS ARE DIFFERENT FROM OTHER SCHOOLS

The results from the teacher survey prove that a strong relationship exists between school characteristics and student achievement. Teachers' ratings of their school and NECAP scores were highly related to one another. Specifically, teachers in schools with better student outcomes were more likely to agree that: their school has a strong focus on student achievement, students are assessed frequently, struggling students are adequately supported, teachers collaborate on a regular basis, teachers have high expectations for students, the principal is an effective leader, and parents are engaged in their child's learning.

FINDING 2: SCHOOLS MATTER

While the first finding established that effective schools are different from other schools on these seven measures, an important question remained. How much do school-level characteristics like leadership or support systems impact achievement relative to other student-level factors like socioeconomic status? Our analysis revealed that socioeconomic status has a powerful effect on student outcomes, which is not inconsistent with national research. Yet each of the seven themes explored by the survey was found to be related to student achievement *even after accounting for the effects of poverty*. In other words, while a school's NECAP performance was related to its demographic profile, it was also related to the ratings its teachers gave it. This means that the school a child attends has an effect on his performance, regardless of his own personal background. So while schools cannot change students' socioeconomic status, they have the potential to improve students' academic outcomes by focusing on factors within their control.

FINDING 3: EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS ARE EFFECTIVE SYSTEMS

At the outset of the study, we sought to identify the specific characteristics associated with student achievement but realized through the teacher survey, and later through site visits, that it was not any single program or strategy that mattered. It is a systems approach that brings about positive student outcomes. Effective schools are active on multiple fronts and teachers who rated their school highly on one practice typically rated their school highly on other practices, as well. Rather than implement one effective practice in isolation, schools with higher NECAP scores have a web of successful practices in place. For example, schools whose teachers continually assess student progress are more likely to provide time for teachers to analyze the results of those assessments collaboratively. Similarly, schools that continuously monitor students' progress are more likely to have a comprehensive support system in place to assist students when data indicate they are slipping.

FINDING 4: TEACHERS' ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS ARE VERY IMPORTANT

Of the seven school characteristics explored by the survey, one in particular stands out—high expectations for students. Teachers' attitudes and beliefs about student potential had more of an impact on NECAP scores than any other theme and were the most powerful predictor of school performance. This suggests that the beliefs and attitudes of staff are critical, perhaps foundational, to student success. Four survey questions about high expectations emerged as especially important:

8a. Teachers in this school have high expectations for all students
8d. Teachers in this school are able to successfully teach the most difficult students
8e. Teachers in this school believe every child can learn
8g. Teachers in this school believe that instruction determines students' academic success ▲

For a full copy of the survey instrument, visit www.rootsofsuccess.wordpress.com

Voices from the Field: Site Visit Results

To gain a more in-depth understanding of effective school characteristics identified via the teacher survey, we chose three sites in the state whose student performance histories defied expectations and whose NECAP scores trumped those of other schools with similar demographic profiles. We visited these schools that are "beating the odds" to learn from them what it takes to ensure that all students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, succeed An interesting note about these schools is that although their staff are aware of the challenges students living in poverty face and have initiated programs in response (e.g. healthy foods available throughout the day, transportation provided for after school activities), the bulk of their success is not the result of special poverty-related programs. Rather, they succeed because they have created a cohesive, responsive *education system* that ensures that each and every child excels. As a result, the lessons learned from these schools are universal and applicable to any building, regardless of its demographic profile.

The first-hand knowledge and experience of the schools visited are invaluable to other educators and leaders hoping to replicate their success. It is their voices that give life to the teacher survey and the characteristics it identified. What do high expectations really look and sound like? How do teachers find time to collaborate during the school day? What supports help students who struggle academically or behaviorally? What follows is a compilation of real-life accounts of persistence, determination, and caring from Vermont educators, administrators, and parents.

It is also worth mentioning that none of the three schools has completely closed the achievement gap. Students from low-income families still lag behind their wealthier peers, even in these strong systems. We have included some of the issues schools continue to battle in their efforts to close the achievement gap. It is important that the education community and social service providers and agencies work collaboratively and creatively to provide the range of supports these children and their families need.

Although they face challenges, what distinguishes these schools from others is their tenacity in addressing them and their refusal to accept student failure, regardless of extenuating circumstances. Rather than blame low performance on family strife or lack of resources, the adults in the schools profiled acknowledge and accept the influence they have on students' success. The result is a highly functioning *system* that helps all of its members—students and adults alike—thrive. Instead of looking to students' demographic profiles to predict their future or explain their past, these schools support students to create new destinies.

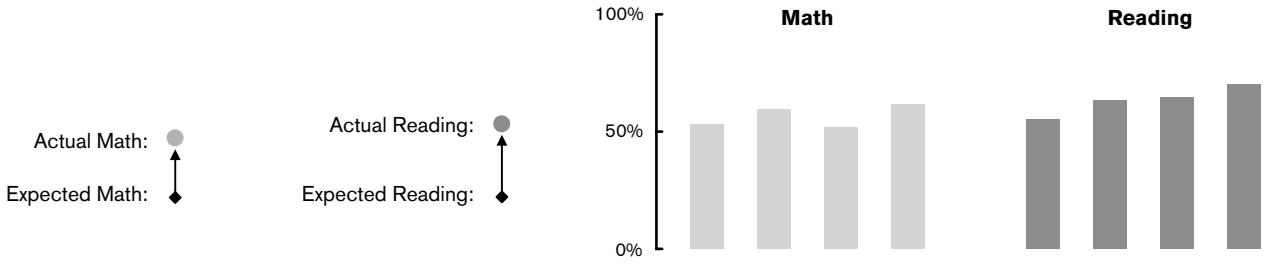
School Profiles

To better understand how schools could effectively support low-income students, we went in search of sites in the state that had evidence of stronger student achievement with this population. Through an analysis of the fall 2008 NECAP Reading and Mathematics scores, we identified three schools that with levels of student performance that well exceeded Vermont norms. All three schools had higher average scale scores than one would predict based on their student demographics and, in addition, demonstrated strong growth over the past four years. For more information on how these three schools were selected, please visit the study's website (www.rootsofsuccess.wordpress.com). Since we felt it was important to use multiple years of NECAP data to identify these success stories, high schools (with only one year of NECAP data available at the time of site selection) were not included. We hope to conduct a similar study at the secondary level in future years.

All schools have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity. The assurance of anonymity allowed staff to speak freely during interviews. The site visit team included five Department of Education employees as well as a member of the study's advisory panel who is also a retired Vermont school principal. The team spent two full days at each school and interviewed all staff (including administrators, classroom teachers, support personnel, and paraprofessionals) as well as students, parents, local school board members, supervisory union/district staff, and superintendents. Interviews followed semi-structured protocols and were digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes. All interview protocols are available on the study website (www.rootsofsuccess.wordpress.com). ▲

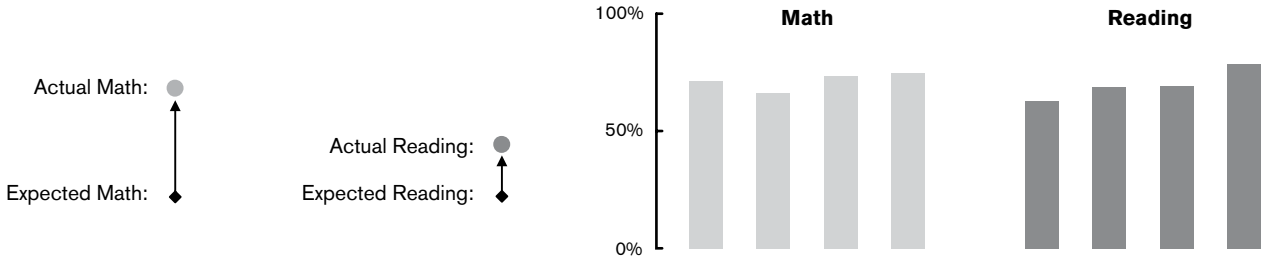
MAPLE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

SCHOOL STATISTICS		COMMUNITY STATISTICS	
Grade span	K-6	Description	City
Total student enrollment (2009)	310	Population (2007)	5100
Percent free/reduced lunch (2009)	61%	Median income (2007)	$30,000
Average grade size (2009)	44	Unemployment rate (2009)	>10%



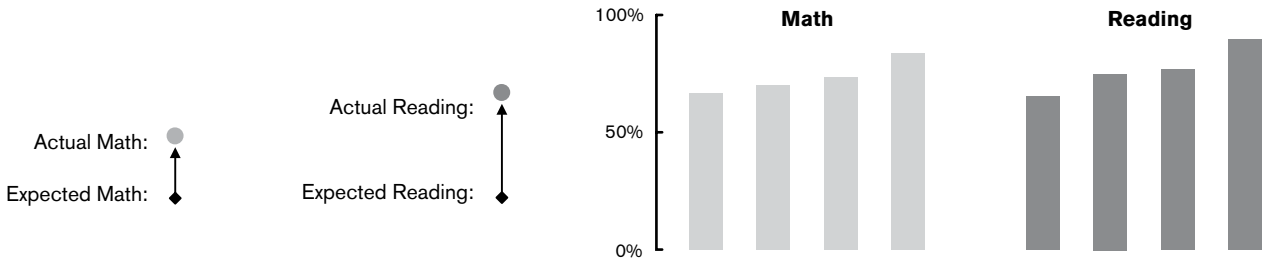
SPRUCE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

SCHOOL STATISTICS		COMMUNITY STATISTICS	
Grade span	K-6	Description	Town
Total student enrollment (2009)	210	Population (2007)	2655
Percent free/reduced lunch (2009)	47%	Median income (2007)	$36,000
Average grade size (2009)	30	Unemployment rate (2009)	5-10%



PINE TREE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

SCHOOL STATISTICS		COMMUNITY STATISTICS	
Grade span	PK-6	Description	Rural
Total student enrollment (2009)	120	Population (2007)	1300
Percent free/reduced lunch (2009)	29%	Median income (2007)	$50,000
Average grade size (2009)	18	Unemployment rate (2009)	5-10%



chapter one
High expectations

Effective systems believe that all students can succeed.

"I've been in other schools and there's clearly a different climate here…there are high expectations for all students. Just because they're in poverty, we're not just going to give up on them (thinking)…so we don't really have to go the extra step. That (attitude) doesn't exist here."

- TEACHER, SPRUCE SCHOOL

High expectations for all students

Perhaps the most prominent value present in the three schools visited was the immense confidence staff had in students' ability to learn. Every child, regardless of socioeconomic background, was held to high expectations and poverty was never used as an excuse for low performance. This belief system permeated the schools we visited from the principal to classroom teachers, from paraprofessionals to the librarian. A math consultant who works with the staff of Pine Tree School commented simply that teachers there "have the belief that all students can learn." A first grade teacher at Spruce School said, "I think the overall philosophy or feeling (here is) that all children can learn and we need to look at where they're at and then move them forward."

However, at Spruce School, high expectations for students were not always the norm. The principal explained how attitudes have shifted over the years. He said, "Certainly one of the things that we've been able to work through…with the changeover in staff the last few years has been maintaining high expectations. There was a period of time where we had veteran staff and they (would say) Spruce is a low income town. We're not (like neighboring wealthier towns). If we were at 55 or 60 percent proficient (they would say) who can ask for anything more? We're doing a pretty good job."

One of the keys to transforming a school culture of low expectations to one of high expectations is hiring the right people. At Maple School, the supervisory union/district early education coordinator observed that hiring for specific attitudes and beliefs is critical to maintaining a culture of high expectations. He said, "Make sure that… you hire staff not just for their curriculum expertise but also for their commitment to children with poverty. The one thing I will say about the staff and the administration (here) is that they have a purpose when they're here. They really firmly believe that children in poverty can learn and…if a child is not learning well, then they can always do something to help improve them. I think that's huge—that commitment to having staff and a philosophy that says low income children can learn." The principal at Pine Tree School shared this view saying that, "You hire the right people (and) let them do their jobs. High expectations is really important and that was one of my concerns when (we had to hire) a lot of new staff…that they keep that bar high…that bar for the kids has to stay high."

They really firmly believe that children in poverty can learn and...if a child is not learning well, then they can always do something to help improve them.

- EARLY ED. COORD., MAPLE SCHOOL

Poverty is not used as an excuse but is understood realistically

Not only do teachers and staff hold high expectations for students, they refute excuses about student behavior or lack of family support that are sometimes heard in other schools when students struggle. Staff members at these three schools refuse to place blame anywhere outside their four walls. Instead, they take full responsibility for students' success or failure and focus on leveraging the resources within their control to improve student outcomes.

The kindergarten teachers at Spruce School commented that "it doesn't matter where they come from or who they are; you want them all making progress." A first grade teacher at Maple School explained that low-income students are held to "the same expectation as everybody else in the room, regardless of what their home life is like." She went on to say that while these students "might need extra help in finding ways to meet those expectations, whether it's extra support here or doing their homework in the after school program, the expectations are still the same." A second grade teacher added that, "support services for students are not an excuse for low achievement. Supports are designed to ensure that students can be successful."

On the other hand, teachers and staff were not naïve about the challenges that life in poverty can sometimes pose for children. They were candid about the burdens it places on their students but were unwilling to cite those burdens as a reason for poor performance. A local school board member at Maple School described the poverty present in his community. "We do have a high unemployment rate and we also have a high rate of several generations of people who have, for whatever reason, opted not to seek employment on an active basis and they're a challenge…but a challenge…that this administration and school has met head on and I think (we) do very well."

A Maple School kindergarten teacher described how she learned not to assume students' level of background knowledge at the beginning of the year. "You can see deficits. There was one time...I did a nursery rhyme and they (didn't know it). They'd never heard it before…so I listed off a couple more and they (had) never heard (of them). You can't assume that they have the same background or the same information, so you have to be open to hear what they're telling you."

However, teachers at these schools do not tend to dwell on the challenges. A creative arts teacher at Maple School commented, "We had a discussion back a couple of years ago…about how we can get bogged down sometimes with that mindset that says oh my, this is the population we're serving, how can we possibly make gains? Well, you can't dwell on that. If you can get yourself to say, it doesn't matter the population I'm serving, hold those standards high and keep pushing, just keep on going." A third grade teacher shared a story about the reaction she received when she decided to take a job at Maple School saying, "A lot of the surrounding schools think, oh, why would you want to teach there? There's so much poverty and the kids are so bad. But it's a misconception. It's just a huge misconception."

Support for students is individualized and not based on socioeconomic status

Another commonality across the three schools was their commitment to meeting the needs of individual students rather than focusing on the perceived deficiencies of a particular sub-group like low-income students. While some school-wide initiatives have been developed with low-income students in mind (such as after school programs that include healthy snacks and transportation) most supports are provided to students on a case-by-case basis.

In fact, the principal at Pine Tree School expressed surprise when she received a phone call from the Department inviting her to participate in a study of successful high-poverty schools. She said, "I think the first thing that I want to say is that we don't ever look at it as our population of low-income students. We don't ever (ask) how do we increase the scores of our free and reduced lunch kids? We look at our data and we see who has needs where. We don't look at it as this population (or that population). We look at it (kid-by-kid)." A first grade teacher at the school echoed this sentiment saying, "Honestly…I don't have a list of who gets free and reduced lunch. I don't have that kind of information. Kids are kids. They all have different baggage. That's just a little tag on them but we don't pull out those kids and then do programs specifically for them. It's who needs assistance and how can we help them?"

At Maple School, staff expressed similar views. A second grade teacher explained, "(Our) supports are not necessarily focused on low-income students. We don't pick it apart (that way). We just look at the kid and what he or she needs. It's hard to isolate programs for low-income students because everything we do is for all students. It's all based on students' needs." The assistant principal said simply, "We always take care of our students regardless of category." The guidance counselor at Maple School discussed how she recently shifted from focusing on students' backgrounds to focusing on what she could control and provide through the school. "When I first came on the job I was consumed with all of the crap and I spent all of my time working on trying to remove the crap. Now I acknowledge it, and validate it and tell the student I can't change it but I/you can do something here at school. I realized what I have control over is what we can do here with kids—help them be successful academically and (identify) their individual strengths and challenges. We started asking different questions (such as), what does this child need to be successful? This was a major shift in what we started to do for our kids. I don't look anymore where the kids live."

A vision for the future

The most concrete example of how teachers at these three schools communicate high expectations for students is their work to provide students with a different vision of their future. In different ways, but with the same goal in mind, staff shared stories of attempts to stretch children's thinking about their future. At Spruce School, teachers described how a simple game of jump rope became a learning opportunity. "Last year, (a fellow teacher) was out at recess where the kids do jump rope with the little sayings. There was something about the grades and they stopped at 12th grade and then they just kind of started over. And she was like, no, no, no, no, there's college! They're 3rd graders (but she already) kind of planted (a seed)…see there's something more out there. I think for a lot of the kids…at home, this is life, this is all there is. And I think here we kind of say, no, we want you to go and there's other stuff for you, too."

The principal of Spruce School drew attention to the intentionality of such subtle strategies. He said, "One of the things that's been disheartening for us is less of 30 percent of (high school) graduates (from our supervisory union/district) were going on to a four year school. That just really hit hard with us, that we need to do a little more focus work on promoting the lifelong formal education piece. I think there is still a good percentage of kids who don't have adults in their family who have gone on to school beyond high school and (that) as a staff, we need to be a little bit more deliberate in how we approach that."

Teachers at Maple School were also candid about their attempts to help students see beyond high school. An art teacher told this story. "One of my 6th grader girls said to me today, I'd like to go to an art school but my mom can't afford it. And I said to her, start building your portfolio now and you take those courses…you can submit that and get grants and scholarships and things like that. It just opened her up. Just like, wow, you know, because it's there. I think it's that hope that there is an outlet." The guidance counselor also commented on the importance of giving students hope for the future. She talked about a student who has "a terrible home life yet has been on the honor roll, does her homework and knows she belongs here. We tell these kids that they will go out into the world and do something." ▲

chapter two
Continuous improvement

Effective systems take responsibility for students' achievement and therefore work to continually improve their own practice.

"The research (about how to reach this population of students) has been there. It's been around for a long time. We've got the information. What we need is the will. That's what drives me."

- PRINCIPAL, MAPLE SCHOOL

Staff take responsibility for student outcomes

While some might subscribe to the notion that a child's success or failure in school is largely the result of effort, ability, motivation, or family influences, staff at these three schools take full responsibility for their students' learning.

A math consultant at Pine Tree School described it by saying, "I think everyone in that building takes ownership for improving student learning from the paraprofessionals to the librarian to the computer (lab teacher), to the secretary." She added that, "The educators in this building really understand that the most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher and I really think the teachers take that with tremendous honesty and professionalism, as does the principal. I think that's why they're getting the results they're getting." The speech/language pathologist at Maple School said simply, "We can't write anybody off. We can't say, this child has a terrible home life…we're never going to get this child caught up, so why bother. We can't write anybody off. All the children have potential and we have a responsibility. If the child is struggling, no matter his income, we have a responsibility to do something about that." This sentiment was echoed by the supervisory union/district superintendent. He said, "It's not the kids and the parents. It's us. We're the problem with students' learning and you have to put the focus back on the professional staff and not on to the problems of the children and the parents. An effective teacher meets the needs of the children no matter what their background is."

...teachers acknowledge the influence their instruction has on student performance.

Teachers at Spruce School also expressed feeling responsible for their students' performance. One fourth grade teacher said, "You just feel so personally invested in those students and particularly if you've tried something new, or made any changes in your program, it's always interesting to see if that had an impact." Pine Tree School felt similarly interested in seeing the effects of their instruction in assessment results. The principal commented that, "What I hear from people (is that) in a lot of schools, they don't always want to look at their data. I'll tell you, people here want to see that data. They want to see how their kids are doing and what their instruction has taught." In other words, teachers acknowledge the influence their instruction has on student performance.

Accepting that teacher instruction has a large influence on student outcomes can be a daunting psychological shift for some people. While it means that successes can be celebrated as professional victories, it also means that failures are taken personally rather than attributed to external factors like lack of student motivation or family support. A teacher at Spruce School discussed the mental difficulty of truly taking ownership over student outcomes. She said, "We all do feel responsible and I think this staff is very invested to the point sometimes where you're almost excruciatingly hard on yourself." Her colleague added, "People put in a tremendous amount of time here. They care. They'll be up some of them until 2:00 in the morning (thinking) how can I challenge this child more in math?" On the flip side, however, the successes are more professionally rewarding. A teacher at Pine Tree School explained that, "It's a cycle. Once you get a taste of that success, you (realize) that, wow these kids are doing better because of what we're doing." A teacher at Maple School expressed a similar sentiment saying, "It's exciting. When I teach something, my kids get it and it shows up on assessment. Isn't that a cool feeling?"

School-wide commitment to continuous improvement

Since the staff and teachers at these schools take such responsibility for the success of their students, they are committed to continually improving their practice. One member of the site visit team commented that it felt as if each of the three schools was on an eternal quest for excellence. Never satisfied with the status quo, they repeatedly ask themselves how they can do better and work tirelessly at identifying possible areas for improvement. As teachers at Spruce School said, "We're always kind of questioning ourselves…what can I do to make it even better?"

The principal at Pine Tree School offered a description of a recent faculty meeting focused on newly released NECAP results. "It's just a whole thrust for excellence and we're always all about how do we do better? We were talking about constructed response on the NECAP and I wanted people to feel good about the fact that (we did) better than where we were a year ago, two years ago. But immediately people were like, but we want to do better than that." A teacher at the school also mentioned similar school-wide conversations. "People really talk about, can we try this? Will this work? We constantly have that question in our heads of…even though we're doing well, that we need to make sure we keep pushing the bar up." A first grade teacher at the school remarked on the level of professionalism that this type of attitude creates in a school. "Everyone here is professional. It's very rarely that people can say they really love going to work and enjoy going to work. I'm surrounded by professionals who are here to figure out how we make sure to do right by kids. How do we get it right and yes there are days that are frustrating…but it's an attitude of we keep plugging away until we keep getting better."

The principal at Maple School was similarly committed to school-wide self-reflection. He described the process of iden-

tifying the right assessments to benchmark and track progress. "What are we going to look at here as a school? What are we going to use as that yardstick to see if we're moving, to see if we're doing the things we want to do? NECAPs do that for us. We look at other things as well. We look at DRAs, we look at POAs, we look at resource room referrals, resolution room referrals. We look at all that stuff all the time to say, what needs to change? What do we have to do better? What do we have to focus on? And that's the conversation that happens around here all the time." Analyzing such data sets gives staff a good indication of where improvements are needed. Reactions to assessment results are never focused on the short-comings of the children but on what the adults in the system can do better. As a first grade teacher at the school explained, "Last year our scores went down. It's not oh, it's the kids…it's more oh, what happened here? Let's look into this and see what's going on. We have to figure out how to get these kids better, to perform better, to make sure that we're aligning everything perfectly, so I think our attitude towards the assessment is really positive. We're excited to see the scores come out. We want to know what else we can do." ▲

chapter three
Leadership

Effective systems are guided by strong leadership.

"I think as a principal she's got a very clear vision (for) her kids…and their achievement. I also believe that she wants this to be a happy, loving community. And that might sound fluffy but it's not because if people aren't happy and they don't feel safe and secure and supported, it's hard to come to work every day. Not that she doesn't push them hard because she does. Think of a happy, fluffy pit bull…"

- TEACHER, PINE TREE SCHOOL

Effective leadership is critical to translating attitudes and beliefs into systems and practices that support student learning. The principals at the three schools embodied a set of personal traits and undertook specific actions that enabled their school to not only talk the talk of high expectations but walk the walk. While each principal had their own unique style and personality, commonalities emerged in the way they approached their job and conceptualized their role.

PERSONAL TRAITS

Supportive of staff

All three principals were described by their staff as compassionate and supportive. Teachers painted a picture of a leader who respected them, trusted them as professionals, and supported them to do what they do best—teach children. Teachers at Spruce School explained that "The feeling is you're a professional. You're doing what you need to do with the kids and I trust you. So the support (is) there. But also he's not coming down every five minutes. He's allowing us, as professionals, to do what we do best and that's work with the kids." Kindergarten teachers at the school portrayed a similar dynamic saying, "He's very approachable and I feel like, as teachers, he supports us as individuals. It's clear what we need to be doing, or working on, but at the same time he gives us space to put our own (spin on it)." Title I teachers at Maple School said simply that their principal's "respect for teachers encourages professionalism."

Staff also emphasized that they felt supported as individuals, not just as professionals. Leaders were described as genuinely interested in the lives and well-being of their staff. This ethos of caring inspired a great deal of loyalty. Fourth grade teachers at Spruce School commented that, "He's academic support, assessment support, but he's also emotional support for you too. I think that's been really important." A fourth grade teacher at Pine Tree School mentioned that the principal "wants to know us personally. If you need support, she'll find a way to get you support. If you're having some personal problems, she'll find time to cover you so you can go and fix your furnace or…if you're not feeling well, she'll call you at home and see how you're doing. She cares."

Child-centered

Another adjective used frequently to describe these three principals was child-centered. Leaders first and foremost care about their students and conveyed their priority in everything they said and did. A third grade teacher at Spruce School said, "Any time I'm asked about the principal that I work for, I always say that the thing that I admire the most is that he is a child advocate." A second grade teacher at the same school commented that, "His greatest strength is his love for children." A teacher at Pine Tree School shared that even when her principal frustrates her, she knows that everything the principal does is for children. "She has extremely high expectations, can be very tough to work with. But she is all about kids. It may drive you nuts but it's all about what's best for kids."

Accessible, visible, and approachable

Accessibility and approachability were other leadership characteristics cited by staff as important. Teachers at Spruce School commented that their principal is always available to talk. "He's very personable. He's not stand offish, he's very approachable. You feel comfortable voicing your opinion." A fourth grade teacher at Pine Tree School explained that the principal, "has an open door policy and she is always willing any time, anywhere, to listen. She may not always agree with you but if you can give her reasons where you can change her mind, she will."

The degree to which the principal was visible around the school was also mentioned by teachers as a very important leadership quality. Teachers at Spruce School commented that their principal "does recess duty. He's out on the playground in the morning with the kids. He does lunch duty. He could say…I'm the principal; I have other things I need to do rather than stand in the lunch room. (But he doesn't.) It's nice to have him out there." Even parents at the school noted his constant presence. One parent said, "The principal is everywhere. He drops off the kids at the bus. He greets you when you walk in." The principal himself commented on how he prioritized interacting with students and staff throughout the day. "It's important for me. I'm usually right here in this main intersection (of the school). When those buses unload the kids out front and the kids walk through the building, it's important for me to be there and check in… not only when the teachers come in but also with the kids." The principal of Maple School shared a similar approach. "I spend very little time in my office. I have to see what's going on. I have to be able to look at it and hear it."

It is not just at key moments in the day, such as morning bus duty or lunch, when principals made themselves seen. All three leaders were described as being consistently involved in work with students and staff throughout the day. A fifth grade teacher at Spruce School recounted that, "There are districts where I've worked in where…you could go the whole day without seeing the principal and that never happens here." A sixth grade teacher agreed saying, "Our boss is not in meetings all day…he's in the planning room with kids who are having trouble achieving." A fifth grade teacher at the same school commented that, "He is at every single EST meeting. He is at every crisis meeting. He's always in the center of what's going on for our kids." The school nurse added that, "He's rarely in his office and if he is, it's usually reading with a kid or with one of us to work on a problem."

Staff at two schools also mentioned that their principal par-

ticipated in professional development alongside teachers. Teachers at Pine Tree School said, "For our in-service meeting last Friday, where was (the principal)? She was in the meetings with the teachers. Wherever it's going on, she's there with us, learning. And you don't always see the other principals from the other buildings there, learning along with the teachers." The school nurse at Spruce School described her principal's involvement this way. "He has been with us step by step along the way and he's taken every course that we've taken, practically. He's done it too so it's not like, okay, you guys go do this and I'll be in my office if you need me." A special educator remarked that the principal, "take courses and in-service and training with us so as *we* increase our knowledge base, so does he. Often administrators are very distant from the classroom in understanding the developmental ages of students and the curriculum but he knows that. I think that's been really instrumental in all of us working together."

Leadership is the bridge between a school's attitudes and beliefs and its actions.

ACTIONS

In addition to specific personal traits, these three leaders shared a common approach to their work. They prioritized three key responsibilities: setting the vision for the school, creating a positive and safe school climate, and hiring, supervising, and evaluating staff. The bulk of their time was devoted to these activities because of their centrality to the school's success. This does not mean that the principals were uninvolved or disengaged from other school functions including those mentioned in this report (e.g. data analysis or communicating with parents). The principal played a role in all such areas. However, it appeared that they chose to prioritize these three tasks because succeeding in those arenas enabled other crucial work to take place. Establishing a common vision for the school focused on school improvement set the stage for ongoing data analysis. Hiring the right teachers helped maintain a culture of high expectations. Leadership is the bridge between a school's attitudes and beliefs and its actions. Leaders help translate values into concrete steps that can be taken to achieve specific goals. Therefore, while these three activities in no way encompass the totality of a leader's responsibility or influence, they lay the foundation for the transformation of ideals into practice.

Setting a vision focused on improving student outcomes

Leaders saw one of their most important responsibilities as setting and maintaining a vision for their school. The principal of Maple School described it this way. "DuFour talks about loose/tight and that resonates with me a lot. The tight is the vision. The stuff that we do, that stuff that we maintain, the learning stuff. The loose stuff is…if you got a way to get this done, let me know and probably it's going to happen. I'm not going to dictate every facet of everything around here. I can't. But it's got to fit with what we're doing. You're not going off on that tangent without really good justification for it." In other words, he is firm when it comes to school goals—improving outcomes for students—but gives staff leeway in determining the best way to achieve those goals. He later added that the vision for the school (improving student outcomes) is non-negotiable. "Those things aren't a choice. It's that loose/tight thing again. Where we're going is where we're going. If you've got some interesting ways to help us get there, we can talk about that." Similarly, the principal of Spruce School explained that he tries to "be clear in terms of what my expectations are" so that staff understands where the school is headed. The principal of Maple School had some advice for leaders of other schools looking to improve. He said, "Figure out that vision (and) know what you want to do. You want to move all these kids but how do we do that? Look at that really objectively and then don't rely on anybody to do it for you. You've got to do it yourself. There's no white knight out there who is going to come charging in. If you believe that it needs to get done, figure out a way to do it and then that's your purpose in life."

It was obvious in talking to teachers and staff that they were cognizant of the school's goals and the stated commitment to improving student outcomes. Fifth grade teachers at Maple School commented that they are all "on the same page and we all have the same vision. We all know where we want the school to go and when you have that, that's how you win." Teachers also attested to the loose/tight approach and to the fact that while their leaders were strict in maintaining the vision, they were flexible in how staff chose to implement it. The early education coordinator for Maple School said, "Teachers feel listened to. He is not a dictator. He does not come in and say, everybody will now do this math curriculum. He gives the teachers ownership over the initiatives that they want to do. I'm thinking about DuFour's work where he talks about loose/tight leadership. He (the principal) is very tight about the outcomes so we have to improve our outcomes for kids in these groups…but you as teachers are the experts and you need to meet together and talk about how you're going to do that." Second grade teachers summarized saying, "(our) ultimate goal is to have all kids succeed. The pathway might change, could be flexible, but the goal never changes. It's ultimately about ensuring that all kids succeed."

Part of setting a vision for the school that staff and the community will support is ensuring that it is achievable. Principals at these schools noted that the vision should be narrowly focused

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

finding candidates with solid content knowledge and pedagogical skills but also specific beliefs and values. They sought out individuals who held high expectations for students, particularly students from poverty, and who could contribute to the overall culture established at the school.

The principal at Pine Tree School said, "Hiring is the key." As a result, she puts a great deal of time and energy into the interviewing process. The superintendent commented that, "One of the things that's unique about interviewing here is that (the principal) has candidates come and they teach all day and she watches them teach. What a novel idea. You can sit in an interview and someone will say how wonderful they are (but)….so (she) will get two or three candidates for a job and watch them teach. She gets a feel for how the person interacts with kids (and) with other colleagues before she makes her decision. I think that is another factor that creates a strong teaching staff." He went on to say that, "She very seldom makes a mistake in a hire. She hires good people. She takes the time to do that and that takes a lot of time but she puts the time in."

These schools wanted teachers who were willing to work with a challenging population and who held high expectations for students. The principal at Maple School said, "My dream has been to have a school (that) would be able to do whatever it took to meet the needs of kids. As a leader, it's been to share that with the people who work here and that means finding the right people to work here. One of the key questions that we ask in interviews is why do you want to teach at this school? And we've had people say because it's close to home. Well they don't last very long in interviews. This place is important. This just isn't going to be another job. You've got to really have some investment here and we expect that investment."

Teachers at these schools were also hired for their dedication and willingness to work hard. A fifth and sixth grade teacher at Pine Tree School recalled serving on an interview committee. "A lot of the questions that we ask during the interview are (things like) are you a team oriented person? Does it surprise you that some of the teachers at this school come in at 7:00am or that they'll leave at 5:00pm at night? (We) just (wanted) to see what people's reactions are." Her recently hired colleague, who was on the other side of the interview table, remembered the experience. She said, "(The principal) told you straight out in the interview, would you be willing to come in on a Saturday? Or would you be willing to stay later to help a student? And that's what she's looking for and that's what we're here for. So the pool is narrowed when you ask those questions."

Spruce School prioritized an individual's willingness to work collaboratively and serve on a team during interviews. The superintendent noted that the school's "hiring practices contribute to collaborative nature of school." Candidates are asked questions about self-reflection, collaboration, and commitment to the school as a whole, rather than their own classroom. The principal at Spruce School reported that the process is effective and said, "I'm very proud of the teachers that we have. We have a pretty good screening process. I think that the staff that we have here are people who are community minded."

Hiring new teachers is only half the battle, at most, since staff turnover at these three schools is reportedly quite low. Therefore, principals have worked to ensure that all staff members, both new and veteran, are supervised and evaluated effectively. Maintaining high quality instruction in each and every classroom, through good hiring practices as well as ongoing monitoring and support, is essential to these schools' success.

Perhaps the strategy that had the greatest effect on teacher practice was the least formal—encouragement from the principal. A common theme heard across the three sites was the extent to which principals pushed teachers to perfect their craft and to become better at their jobs. Teachers reported growing as professionals under the tutelage of their principal. The principal of Spruce School said that a key aspect to working with teachers is "talking with them and trying to reinforce the same expectation that we have for kids… trying to push them to be a little more reflective with their practice." Teachers seemed to appreciate his guidance. A creative arts teacher said, "We have a principal that pushes us to learn…how we could teach differently. We have higher standards for ourselves." High expectations for staff was a theme echoed loudly at Pine Tree School. Teachers there noted that their principal has "high expectations of us and the kids. She holds you accountable for things. She follows through on it. Even if it's something you really don't want to do, she's there checking with you." A fellow teacher concurred. "She holds you accountable and sometimes it's not so much fun but it makes you better and it makes you stronger. She makes you become a better teacher." Teachers at Maple School also reported being continually challenged as professionals. A second grade teacher explained that the principal "pushes people to meet goals. Responsibility is shared for improvement but the expectation that improvement will happen is there."

One way that these principals determine how and where to challenge staff is through consistent observation of classroom instruction. According to teachers at all three schools, the principal is a constant presence in their classrooms. Sixth grade teachers at Spruce School commented that, "He's always in the classroom. He pops his head in every day. He's down in our classroom at the end of the day when the kids have left just to check in, follow up on some things, or see how something went." He uses these check-ins to offer guidance and feedback to teachers. A fifth grade teacher at the school said she respects his advice because he is a former teacher himself. "He was a teacher for a long time and when you meet with him, he's there with some real life (advice)…well what if you tried this or (I noticed) the kids got really into this and maybe you could push them this way… instead of just yup, looks good, none of the kids flew out of your room. So there's some real teaching academic advice that you get from him when you're meeting with him." The principal at Pine

Tree School also tries to be a presence in classrooms. She said, "I feel like I'm pretty visible. I'm kind of around. I know what's going on. I'm just in and out a lot." Special educators attested to the fact that, "She comes in pretty often to observe in our room. She's always welcome to come into our room and observe instruction." The assistant principal at Maple School believes she is able to gather important information about instruction in just a few moments. She said, "I'm able to quickly assess if what's going on is quality instruction (which I define) as meeting all the needs in the classroom." The principal agreed. "I learn more by just everyday wandering this building than I do from a couple of shots of watching people when they know I'm coming."

And it is not only principals who conduct classroom observations and offer teachers feedback. Instructional coaches play an important role at both Spruce and Pine Tree Schools. Fifth grade teachers at Spruce commented that, "We have a math consultant who works with us, who observes us, team teaches with us. There is a schedule for that every week and you're required to consult or work with her directly twice during the fall and twice during the spring." A first grade teacher also mentioned the value of the math consultant. "She'll come in and work with you (or) team-teach. When she does an observation, she (takes) notes. We could do that with video taping and then go back and analyze it but she has an expertise that we don't. She's right up front and tells us that she is doing this to help us and it's not going to be in our files and go on record. The notes come right to us and she talks to us about what she sees and what we could work on. It's a very comfortable." Pine Tree School has also brought in a math consultant who works directly with teachers on their content and pedagogical skills. In both cases, the consultant was hired as a direct result of a need identified through school-wide analysis of assessment results.

These schools wanted teachers who were willing to work with a challenging population and who held high expectations for students.

Principals at these three schools also paid particular attention to the needs of first-year teachers. New teachers at Spruce are mentored and provided with what a second grade teacher described as an "extensive support system for beginning teachers." The principal is a key player in this support system. The teacher explained that, "He goes above and beyond the typical principal. He comes into classrooms at least five times a year and pops in even more than that. You have a pre-conference and a post-conference and he lets you know what you're doing well and what you need to work on. He helps you set goals to meet. Support is provided for first five years for new teachers." New teachers at Pine Tree School are paired with a mentor through the Pathwise program. The supervisory union/district curriculum coordinator there also made mention of the principal's efforts to provide new staff with all the same training veteran staff have received so that everyone is on the same page. She noted that "the principal nurtures them. In some school settings…they forget that your whole school may have had a whole Investigations three-day workshop and you bring in new teachers in expecting them to just jump on board."

In addition to ongoing encouragement, observation, and feedback, principals also leverage a formal evaluation system to improve teacher practice. Spruce School was in its first year of a new evaluation system established by the supervisory uion/district. The principal reported that he, "was resistant at first but what I found was, if I'm sitting and talking with teachers about those 72 functions and expectations (outlined by the system), it brings out all kinds of possibilities. It has provided a clearer set of expectations." He also mentioned that he uses the evaluation system as a starting point for supporting teachers. "As I look to support the teachers, it starts with that evaluation system. For the most part, we agree on what areas need to improve and come up with a plan." The principal of Pine Tree School also highly values her teacher evaluation system. She explained that, "I meet with people before we have an observation and talk about their goals. I spend a lot of time talking with them. I always do at least 45 minutes for a formal observation and then I always sit down and talk with them a long time afterwards." A teacher at the school described being on the receiving end of one of those evaluations. "She's very professional about it. She wants our lessons plans with all the standards. She has very high expectations of her people. But her evaluations aren't meant to be negative either. She does them to make sure we're doing what's best. In the end, that's what she's looking for…how can we make it better? It's all for the students to succeed and do well." Maple School uses the Charlotte Danielson evaluation model which also includes formal classroom observations. The principal described his response if an evaluation reveals teacher weaknesses. He said, "I require that they get better. It depends on what they're struggling with. I know people here pretty well and I know what it will take to move them. There might be some mentoring that needs to happen. There is all kinds of stuff that will happen but something will happen."Principals also addressed next steps if a teacher does not improve. According to the principal of Pine Tree School, "having a teacher not be successful is the hardest situation I have ever had to deal with as an administrator. I will always work with somebody if they want to improve, but if somebody is not willing to change and (is) not good for kids, they have to go. That's just the way it is, and it's an awful, awful thing to have to go through. That's the worst thing I had

to do as an administrator. But there's not a choice." The principal of Maple School described an incident where he was forced to make a tough decision. "We decided early on that grade levels would act as teams and I had a teacher on a team who didn't want to play that way. I offered to move her to a different team and she was going to fight about that and she retired. I lost an excellent teacher but it was more important for her to become part of that team than to stand in the way and stop everything." At the end of the day, these principals are not afraid of conflict. If a teacher is not willing to make the necessary improvements to be effective in the classroom or to support a school-wide initiative (like teaming) that is crucial to improving student outcomes, these principals confronted the issue head-on. Effective leadership does not just mean hiring and supporting the right people. It also means identifying the wrong people in your system and either helping them to improve or removing them. ▲

chapter four
Use of data

Effective systems use data in an ongoing way to provide feedback to staff as well as monitor and support students.

"It's important to know that the strategies, the techniques, and the programs that we're using are effective and in order to do that we have to do regular assessments. If our assessments aren't showing that those programs are working, then we need to look at different programs."

- SPEECH LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST, MAPLE SCHOOL

One of the most striking characteristics of the three schools visited was their ubiquitous use of data. These schools are committed to monitoring the efficacy of their efforts and their students' progress and quickly addressing any weaknesses. To do so, they have realized that they must constantly collect and analyze data. At the heart of all actions taken at the schools are two questions: How are we doing and what should we do differently? These questions are posed and answered at a variety of levels. At the school level, they are answered using school-wide data, including state assessment data, local assessment results, special education referral rates, or student behavior statistics. At the classroom level, they are answered by summative tests, benchmark testing, formative assessment, or classroom observation. At the student level, a broad array of data points are used to determine how a child is progressing and what supports or interventions might be necessary. Regardless of the level at which the data analysis occurs, the process is the same. Staff members rely on data to tell them how they are doing, how students are doing, and what their next steps should be. Data guide them and their improvement efforts. Yet data are recognized as a tool only. Collecting and analyzing data alone is not sufficient or productive. It is in the actions that are taken as a result of the new understandings brought about by data analysis that result in improvements in student learning.

SCHOOL-LEVEL

Data analysis

Using data to inform decision-making is modeled at these three schools starting at the top. The faculties at these schools recognize the value of school-wide data sets for informing programmatic, staffing, and instructional changes. As a result, there is widespread commitment to assessment, particularly state assessment, because of the key information it returns on the effects of school-wide initiatives and teacher practice. (However, all three schools mentioned using a variety of other assessment measures including supervisory union/district and school assessments and had robust local assessment systems in place.)

At the heart of all actions taken at the schools are two questions: How are we doing and what should we do differently?

Analysis of state assessment data points to the degree of curricular alignment with the GEs and helps reveal what next steps the school needs to take to further student learning. The principal at Spruce School noted that, "I don't see a lot of anxiety or fear from the teachers around the NECAP experience…it has forced clarity among the staff. What are we asking kids to do? When the results come back, the first stop is for teachers to take at look at those results and respond. Is that what they predicted? Are there surprises there? What part is most encouraging for them and what numbers indicate that there are some more needs they need to take a look at?" Teachers at the school confirmed this lack of anxiety. A literacy specialist commented that, "Everyone wants to be on the same page and know how the kids (are) doing and what do we need to do. Everybody wants to know what the (NECAP) results are and…what they feel they need to do to help the kids."

State assessment data is viewed similarly at Maple School. The principal reported that, "We've gotten okay at looking at data and figuring out what it means. We sit down and say what is it telling us? Who are the kids? What about those kids? What about the curriculum? We're looking at our primary reading program again because we're not sure it's doing what we want it to do." Sixth grade teachers at the school agree that the school "has really paid attention to our test results. We've really taken and analyzed the data very seriously and I would say that's school-wide. We really go over it. We disaggregate it. We try to figure out what can we do better, where are the gaps." A first grade teacher added that, "our attitude towards the assessment is really positive. We really use it to guide us. It's not, oh great, NECAPs. We're excited to see the scores come out. We want to know what else we can do." A second grade teacher also emphasized the strong link between the state assessment and standards saying, "It's really about the GEs. If students are struggling on the NECAP, then they're struggling with grade-level expectations. We need to address that. We need to adjust instruction based on the data."

Analyzing and using state assessment data at Pine Tree School has become a way of life. The principal explained that results are used to gauge how well the staff, not students, are doing. She said, "We really use (NECAP) results as what are we going to do differently, not what the kids need to do differently. We look at did we teach that concept, if we did teach it why do we think they missed it, were students confused by the question/format, etc. What do we need to do so students will be successful on that question the next time?" The school's math consultant confirmed this saying, "You'll note that if you asked any of them (the teachers) about the NECAP data, they'll be able to tell you exactly which kids need what intervention, but more importantly, they will tell me what intervention *they* need. I've already gotten an email from two teachers (asking for) help with fractions using a number line." The principal described the process she and her staff use to sift through the results each year. "We look at…the item analysis, for each grade level for that content area. Then we brainstorm the patterns, the trends (and ask ourselves), Why? What (are) the possible reasons for those patterns?" The school's Reading Recovery teacher shared what the experience is like from a teacher's perspective. "When

the NECAP (results) come back, we have an all professional staff time where we analyze the entire thing to death. It's almost to the point of no return. You want to just scream after awhile. But it does work. It really makes a difference. We go to the item analysis and we find out the different things that are missing. We talk about professional development, or reducing professional development, or we plan for next year. Or we go through and (identify), well, they did really well in that in your room and compare classrooms. It is an all professional staff analysis."

Acting on data

Perhaps what is most important about these schools' use of data is that they are not satisfied with analysis alone. After interpreting the results and identifying areas of strength and weakness, they take the critical next step of acting on this new learning. The principal of Pine Tree School said, "That to me is the important thing…that conversation about the data and what we need to do next. To me, that's when you'll see a difference in your results." Part of what they do next is formalize areas for improvement through the school's action plan. As the principal explained, after analyzing the results, "(we identify) next steps to address the reasons and include those on the action plan." A local school board member was impressed with the strong link between the school's action plan and NECAP results. He said, "I'm always impressed with—boom!--that results go right in (the action plan). (The principal) and the staff analyze it and then it's in the action plan. That's probably one of the reasons for the growth every year is using that information, not just looking at it and then tossing it aside." Assessment results do not just help the school craft its action plan; they also provide a blueprint for the work of outside consultants. The school's math consultant explained that, "When I first started here, they were very, very weak in problem solving skills, depth of knowledge three, in questioning. But they knew it. That's why they asked me to come. They handed me a list of things they feel they're weakest in and I've been slowly working my way through the list with the teachers in the building."

This process of data analysis, identifying areas for improvement, and then determining appropriate next steps to address them forms a large part of the work teachers do together during staff meetings at Pine Tree. A fifth/sixth grade teacher commented, "I'd be very curious if somebody was to actually time each staff meeting and each in-service we had, what percentage would be spent at looking at our data and talking about the next steps that we're going to take from there. I would say it's well over like 75 percent of our staff meetings and in-service time." She said, "When we have conversations, it's not, oh we don't have time, oh we can't do this. (We try) to come to a solution and we constantly have that question in our heads of even though we're doing well, we need to make sure we keep pushing the bar up." She felt that such professional conversations were at the heart of the school's success and gave this advice to other schools looking to improve student outcomes. "My biggest advice would be that at a staff meeting, you should spend your time having conversations. Everything that can be put on a piece of paper and stuck in a mailbox should be put on a piece of paper and stuck in a mailbox."

The process of data analysis at Maple School is similar. State assessment results (and results from other local assessments) are used to identify appropriate next steps, particularly in relationship to curriculum and instruction. An enrichment teacher noted, that "When we started looking at our results, we looked at what they need to know and where they are. We found the holes in our curriculum and we filled them." Special educators met with fifth and sixth grade teachers to review the results. "We looked at the examples, the released items, and tried to see if there were areas where we could focus on. We tried to say, okay, what could we do as a group to help these kids to do better? Informational text was something that we wanted to focus on, and vocabulary was something we wanted to focus on. Then in math geometry seemed to be in the areas of weakness and fractions. So we looked at all of those to try to see how we could help the kids build the skills." It was also important to Maple School that teachers of the earlier grades understand what was expected of students in the later grades. This new understanding had implications for both curriculum and instruction. Sixth grade teachers recounted meeting with colleagues from the early elementary grades. "Last year, as a school, we did cross grade level meetings every Tuesday (to review NECAP results). And one of the big things that came out of that was the kindergarten, first grade and second grade teachers realized what is expected of these students by the time they do the NECAPs. Some of them had no idea. They had a better understanding of the number sense behind them, the whole idea of number sense, and how important it is. That opened up a lot of eyes. They really could see what happened down the road."

Ensuring optimal student performance on state assessments

All three schools strived to set their students up for success on the NECAP by providing optimal testing conditions and appropriate accommodations. The principal of Pine Tree School said, "The whole school testing environment…is so important for all students to be as successful as possible." Teachers agreed. A fifth and sixth grade teacher mentioned that, "We try to do the best we can for the students (and) give them the best testing environment that we can." This means matching students with appropriate accommodations as well as preparing children for the actual testing day. A special educator discussed accommodations. "We use the accommodations where the kids read aloud to themselves

a lot because so many of these kids' core issue is their reading fluency. There are certain kids that need a quieter space so that they can focus. Several of the kids have test anxiety so to be out of the room, it takes pressure off of them if others finish before them." The assistant principal at Maple School also mentioned the importance of accommodations saying, "We work very hard at being clear with the state allowable accommodations and just making sure that whenever it's appropriate, it is done."

Teachers at the schools also helped students become familiar with the format of the test so that it was not overwhelming or confusing on test day. Sixth grade teachers at Spruce School discussed helping students become comfortable with the amount of space given to write their constructed response answers. "We have them write on-demand writing in a box with lines. Every prompt, we put it at the top with the amount of lines…just getting them to know they have to write within a box, being familiar with the layout of the test." A sixth grade teacher at Maple School shared a similar approach saying, "Personally, I spend quite a bit of time just making sure (students) know what (the test) is going to look like. We use the released items so that they're familiar with it."

But all three schools were quick to point out that while they viewed state assessment results as valuable indicators of students' progress and worked to ensure that students did their best on test day, they did not see it as their mission to solely boost scores. Their job is to improve student learning. As the superintendent of Spruce's district said, "We have not been front and center about NECAP scores. We've been open about them, but we haven't been chasing the test scores. We are more concerned about producing quality student work. I think that is important because we have seen improvement in the scores without focusing on them." A special educator at Pine Tree School explained, "I don't come in here every day ready to teach to the NECAP test. I want (the students) to be happy here…learn a skill that they can go back home and tell their parents about. Not just adding and subtracting but social skills too and interaction skills."

Teachers at these three schools consistently make day-to-day and minute-to-minute decisions based on data.

CLASSROOM-LEVEL

Use of classroom assessment

Teachers at these three schools consistently make day-to-day and minute-to-minute decisions based on data. All actions in the classroom are data driven. Teachers reported using data in three primary ways: to improve and inform their instruction, to group students and monitor their progress, and to determine appropriate supports and interventions for children. A variety of data sources were tapped for each of these functions including district-wide assessment results, informal student observations, and formative assessments.

When asked how they personally use assessment data, teachers responded overwhelmingly that they rely on it to inform instruction. A fourth grade teacher at Spruce School commented that she uses assessment to "drive instruction and to get to know your students as learners." Her colleague, a fifth grade teacher, agreed and spoke specifically about the value of formative assessment in providing her with feedback about her practice. "Formative assessment is definitely to inform your teaching. I do similar things with the daily language pieces that they work on. I grade them all over the weekend and that tells me what I need to teach the next week. (If) the kids don't know how to use quotation marks, or punctuation, you build your little mini lesson around that." A first grade teacher at Pine Tree School echoed this sentiment saying, "We use assessment to drive (our) instruction and to find the holes… to move on and keep everyone moving in the right direction." She described the process of tapping assessment results to tell her how she is doing. "These are the things they've already been taught. How did it go? Did most of the kids get it or maybe I should go back and touch on a few things? It's really looking and reflecting and constantly making improvements."

Teachers also discussed the value of assessment data in determining students' base level of knowledge, grouping them, and then monitoring their progress. Fourth grade teachers at Spruce described the process of setting reading groups. "We do a reading assessment at the beginning of the year and then we break the students into reading groups. If need be, (we) change them around as the year progresses. Then again at the end of the year, (we'll) do another reading assessment so that's gives us one measure of growth in reading for the year." A fourth grade teacher at Pine Tree relies on assessments for similar purposes. "Assessment is really great because then you know where every child is and then you can plan for that child. I love it because it's black and white. I'm very linear in my thinking. I like to know where I need to start and what I need to tackle and then go and do it. It shows me where every child is and children can move in and out of various groups or various areas, depending on their needs. So a student (will not necessarily) stay in one group all year."

Finally, teachers rely on assessment data to identify which students may need additional supports. A fifth and sixth grade teacher at Pine Tree School depends on assessment results for determining interventions. She said, "I use it for intervention. If I'm going to refer a student (to our EST) it's based on assessments. We use those assessments to determine who's going to need extra support or not." Assessments help Reading Recovery

teachers at Spruce School spot the students who might benefit from additional literacy support. "For Reading Recovery, we look at the children who are most in need coming into first grade and based on a survey and the POA results, we then target those kids that are significantly below average. That's done as a team with the Reading Recovery teachers, the principal, and the first grade teachers."

But support does not always mean a referral to a formalized support program like Reading Recovery or special education. A fifth grade teacher at Spruce School described how she used assessments to tell her which students might benefit from additional instructional assistance in the classroom. "If they do a worksheet, I look at it and I say okay, these five kids didn't get it. Obviously tomorrow I need to pull those five kids say, let's get our whiteboards and our markers and go back over this. I really try to do that, especially in math."

Support is also not limited to students who struggle. All three schools mentioned the importance of using assessment data to identify students who needed additional enrichment. As kindergarten teachers at Maple School explained, assessment "also helps us determine groups that are ready for a challenge. Both spectrums, it helps out." Similarly, the paraprofessionals at Spruce School noted that assessment "allows teachers to know who needs re-teaching and who could benefit from enrichment."

Teachers were also quick to point out that the assessment strategies they use in the classroom are varied and designed to address a range of learning styles. A fifth grade teacher at Spruce School said, "I think when we look at any unit of study we try to vary the assessment so that we address a lot of different learning styles. So some might be paper/pencil, some might be a jigsaw with collaborative learning, some might be an art piece that we're doing, another might be a presentation…so there's a chance for some of the kids who are more artistic to shine, some of the kids who are good group problem solvers to shine, and so forth." A fourth grade teacher at Pine Tree shared a similar philosophy. "Sometimes I do regular paper tests (but) not a whole lot. (I do) a lot of observations and a lot of check-ins. I do projects, just lots of observation (including) talking to the children, pulling them aside. What did you learn out of this? I keep portfolios of their learning."

Alignment to Grade Expectations

Another strong point that teachers made is that all assessments they administer in the classroom, as well as their overall instruction, are aligned to the state's Grade Expectations. Alignment is an important component of good assessment practice. The supervisory union/district curriculum coordinator for Maple School noted that "teachers need to be very familiar with GEs. Every classroom should have the GEs that they're focusing on posted. You should be able to walk up to a student and ask them which GEs they're working on and they'll be able to tell you in their own words to show that they understand what it means." A third grade teacher at Spruce School said, "We talk candidly with our students about grade level expectations at the beginning of the year. I think it's much fairer to make sure they understand why I'm going to do something. And if they ask why we have to do this, I'm willing to talk about why. It's a part of the daily dialogue" A first grade teacher at Pine Tree School said, "I have mentored a few new teachers in the building and we talked about aligning (classroom assessments) with the GEs…pre-assessments, post-assessments." A second grade teacher at Maple school said, "Everything (we) do is aligned with the GEs." ▲

chapter five
Professional teaching culture

Effective systems establish a professional teaching culture that supports high-quality instruction.

"We want to see our kids do well and we know that collaboration is an important piece of that. So it's just a priority."

- TEACHER, MAPLE SCHOOL

All three schools have established what can be described as a professional teaching culture. This culture is characterized by a high degree of staff commitment and dedication to their work, trust among staff members, high levels of collaboration, and effective use of paraprofessionals. Another aspect of these schools' professional teaching culture is the care and consideration that principals put into hiring decisions (discussed in a previous section). Such a culture ensures that high-quality instruction takes place in each and every classroom.

Staff commitment and dedication

A primary characteristic of a professional teaching culture is staff members' high level of commitment and dedication to their work. Teachers at all three schools put an immense amount of time and energy into their responsibilities and did whatever was required to ensure that students succeeded. As a fifth grade teacher at Spruce School said, "We're all professionals and none of us are content to do the job halfway. We (do) whatever it takes." A member of the school's literacy team described the staff as persistent. "Teachers don't give up on the kids. As frustrated as we may get at times, they just are tenacious. They stick with it and want the best for kids."

When asked what she thought was responsible for the school's success, a fourth grade teacher at Pine Tree School responded, "Our deep caring for kids. That's a big component and everybody just pushes beyond. We have teachers that are in here at 6:00 in the morning (who don't) leave until 6:00 at night. We have teachers that come in on weekends. We have paraprofessionals staying after and working in the after school program. They don't have to do that. They could go home but they want to do that." As a local school board member remarked, "They don't get run over by a bus on the way home!" Teachers at Pine Tree were even willing to give up a day of their spring vacation to attend a professional development workshop.

Mutual trust and respect

Besides hard work, another important component of a professional teaching culture is mutual trust and respect among staff members. This is a necessary precursor to any sort of staff collaboration. A fourth grade teacher at Pine Tree School indicated that this was the case at her school. "We're very open. We feel safe with one another." She added, "We are all different. We all have different styles in the way we teach in our classrooms and everybody's style is appreciated and admired. (It's not), oh, you teach that way versus…I teach this way. My way's better than yours. Everybody appreciates how everybody teaches and we all kind of learn from one another." The school's math consultant agreed saying, "They (the staff) interact well with each other; they're respectful. They share their mistakes without fear of each other…there's a lot of analysis about their practice and their procedure."

Culture of open doors and interdependence

That staff work together is a foregone conclusion at these schools. Collaboration is constant and ongoing. There are no closed classroom doors. In fact, teachers have realized that in order to achieve their goals, they must rely on each other for support, guidance, and feedback. The feeling you have when talking with staff at these three schools is that they are part of a well functioning team that shares responsibility for all students. They are not independent contractors who happen to have "offices" in the same building. A special educator at Spruce School said, "As a staff, we want to work together. Nobody wants to go into their room and close the door and be alone." The supervisory union/district curriculum coordinator for Pine Tree School noted, "I don't see teachers here shutting their classroom doors. They're communicating; they're talking about data constantly. It truly is a community working together for kids and I don't believe that's just a slogan or lip service. I see that happening." A first grade teacher at the school agreed saying, "I think that the environment here (is that) it's expected…that you won't be isolated in your own little room. You'll be talking with others and bouncing ideas, (asking), what do you think? It just seems like a natural, obvious thing that you would do." Teachers at Maple School said, simply, "You can't work in isolation."

One of the most important ways teachers and staff collaborate at these schools is to share instructional strategies. A fourth grade teacher at Pine Tree School said, "We talk all the time about what we do in the classroom that we thought was really great or what really stunk. What can you do to help me out? Oh my goodness, this just bombed! Can I get any ideas? Or else somebody will say, gee, have you thought about this?" First grade teachers at Maple School reported a similar dynamic saying, "We all teach the same subject but at different times during the day. So if she does math first and something really worked for her, she'll come in a say, whoa, wait a minute, try this (next) time. This really worked today. So we're always popping in on each other…throwing a paper on each other's desk (saying), try this kind of assessment. It's ongoing." A fifth grade teacher at Spruce School commented that she particularly appreciates the culture of openness and support at her school because she is a beginning teacher. "I do feel like, especially as a first year teacher, I can go to my colleagues and just say, I don't know what else to do. I've used it all. And they have kind of this plethora of knowledge that's different. (They'll say), oh why don't you try this, or why don't you do this?"

In addition to talking about their instruction—what worked and what did not—teachers reported entering each other's

classrooms to observe a lesson and offer feedback. As first grade teachers at Maple School commented, "Nobody's shocked when somebody walks in their room." Pine Tree School encourages teachers to observe one another. A fourth grade teacher noted that, "I have teachers come in and observe how I'm doing math, or what I'm doing in science so they can support me also. There is a comfort level in being in someone else's room." A fifth and sixth grade teacher added, "Something we're trying to do more of is having teachers go and observe other teachers in the school. Earlier this year, I went to see what the younger grades were doing in their spelling program. I wanted to know, what are some of the pieces I might use when I'm meeting with (my students) in small groups? So I went and watched the second grade teacher teach one of her lessons…and I asked her a couple of questions after." A special educator at Spruce School also observes and offers her colleagues advice. "The teacher will often say, how do you think that lesson went? And I might offer observations. I won't make a judgment but I'll offer the observations and let him come to the conclusion for his own judgments. It just works and I think if you're not judgmental, they aren't afraid to share.

We work as a cohesive unit, all of us together.

SIXTH GRADE TEACHERS, SPRUCE SCHOOL

Horizontal and vertical communication

Teachers at these three schools also collaborate regularly for another purpose—aligning the content of their instruction across classrooms and grades. They want to know what skills and knowledge students will be coming to their classroom with as well as what they will need going forward. Sixth grade teachers at Spruce School said, "We work as a cohesive unit, all of us together. We look at the standards that we're teaching in first grade and how (they) transition into second grade all the way up to sixth grade. Okay, so fifth grade, you're teaching the Oregon Trail and then where do we pick up the underlying concepts of that into sixth grade?" Likewise, the fifth grade teachers reported talking with the sixth grade teachers about similar issues. "We're often talking to the sixth grade teachers (asking) what are you guys going to do next year? What are you noticing that kids from fifth grade are missing in sixth grade? I think that's especially important." First grade teachers at Maple School engaged in related work. "(We tried) to find out what our loopholes were in math. The first grade team met with the fifth grade team and we discussed our scope and sequence, what it is we were working on, what it is that maybe we could be doing more, or where our kids are weak by the time they're fifth graders." The fifth grade teachers were pleased with the outcome of the discussion saying, "That was really big, for us to get together across the grade levels… just to make sure we're all working through what the action plan is, who's covering what sections of text, and how it's being produced."

First grade teachers at Maple School also commented on the value of ensuring that their language and terminology were consistent across classrooms and grades so that students would not be confused. As part of their conversation with fifth grade teachers, they discussed "what kind of language is necessary for math to make (sense to) our kids. So we're all talking the same talk all the way up through." Consistency of language was a strong focus of teachers at Spruce, too. First grade teachers there said, "We've tried to become consistent in our alphabet that is up around in each of our rooms (and establish) consistency from grade to grade and room to room so that these kids are not getting confused by different things. It makes a difference with kids." A very similar comment was made by teachers at Pine Tree School. "Something that makes our school great (is) we try really hard to have that consistency and common language throughout so that kids aren't going from one room to the next and saying, if (this teacher) is teaching a vowel sound…she's calling it a blend (but) in (this teacher's) room…they call it a something else. The kids are just going to get confused. We're trying to keep everything common." Such vertical and horizontal alignment—of both content and language—would not be possible without ongoing communication among staff.

Structures that enable staff collaboration

So how do teachers have time to work together on such important issues? Schools reported that staff collaboration was the result of both formal and informal gatherings. Each school was in a different place in terms of the degree to which their collaboration time had been formalized. For example, at Maple School, teachers' contract day runs from 8:00am to 4:00pm. However, students are dismissed at 3:00pm. A second grade teacher said, "(There is a) shared school wide understanding that the 3:00-4:00pm time slot is for staff collaboration. It is understood that this is not time for creating a new bulletin board. This time is to meet with each other." Sixth grade teachers expanded on how that time block can be used. "It's meeting time. That's when we have our (educational support team) meetings, IEP meetings. That's when we have our faculty meetings. That's when we have parent conferences. That's when (we met to discuss) NECAP. If you want to call a meeting, you know that people are going to be there." The common time block has allowed the school to set a regular schedule for a variety of meetings including the ones mentioned above. Special education case managers meet with classroom teachers weekly during this slot to consult about students receiving services. Classroom teachers meet with the

speech language pathologist bi-weekly. Staff reported engaging in more informal forms of collaboration such as talking over lunch, as well, but it was clear that the dedicated, common afternoon block allowed for ongoing, substantive work.

In the other two schools, teacher collaboration was more informal. Spruce School provides a common planning time once a week for grade-level teams and also runs a winter activity program for students that affords most teachers availability every Friday afternoon for a period of six weeks. The school also holds a full faculty meeting every Monday afternoon. However, most collaboration happens on the fly. Teachers described stopping each other in the hallway to ask for advice or share a tip, eating lunch together daily, gathering before school, taking walks together after school, and communicating constantly via email. Many even stay past 6:00pm on a regular basis to work together.

At Pine Tree School, almost all the collaboration that takes place, outside twice monthly faculty meetings, is informal. Teachers reported "talking constantly," popping in on each others' classrooms to confer, meeting in the hallways between classes, and having lunch together. In addition, several teachers are pursuing a Master's degree together from a regional university and others take courses together in the summer. Many commented that because the school is so small, communication happens naturally all the time.

Effective paraprofessionals

The professional teaching culture at these schools extends beyond classroom teachers to paraprofessionals. It became clear in interviews with principals, teachers, and paraprofessionals themselves that the role of support staff is taken very seriously. Paraprofessionals are highly valued, seen as vital to the success of the school, and given great responsibility as members of the school's instructional team. A special educator at Spruce School observed that, "I think the paraeducators feel very valued. They work with students whereas, in other schools, they do more clerical work. (Here), they're an integral part of the classroom." The paraprofessionals at Spruce School confirmed this. "(We) are treated as professionals. I can share good ideas with the teacher and the teacher is willing to try them. It's a team effort. We are referred to as teachers when we are in the classroom. You are part of the team regardless of your stated role." A local school board member at Pine Tree School also commented on the way support staff are treated. He said, "In talking with other people, they think paraeducators are babysitters. Maybe they are in some schools but not here." It is worth noting, as well, that the dedication and commitment exhibited by classroom teachers is shared by paraprofessionals. As a creative arts teacher at Spruce School commented, "They do an amazing job. (They are) some of the hardest workers in this school." Similarly, a fourth grade teacher at Pine Tree School noted that "Paras will take extra time before school and after school to work with children. They are very driven. They just see where a child is lagging and they'll just pitch in."

Because of the important role paraprofessionals play in these three schools, principals felt it was critical that they be offered the professional development needed to work effectively with students. This often meant that paraprofessionals received the same training provided to classroom teachers. At Spruce School, external math and literacy consultants hired to improve staff's instructional skills also made time to work with paraeducators. As the principal explained, "We have a math teacher leader who's here one day a week (to do) planning with teachers. (She) has worked with paraprofessionals to improve their skills, modeled (for) teachers, observed and given feedback. That's been a good resource." Pine Tree School also ensured that their paraprofessionals benefited from such opportunities. The principal asked the school's math and literacy teacher leaders to provide professional development to paraprofessionals as well as classroom teachers. A teacher at the school described a training the internal literacy leader recently offered the group. "A lot of the paras went to her and said that they were having a hard time conferencing with students because they didn't know how to conference with struggling students without just doing the work for them. So she had an in-service with them (one) morning about how you conference with kids." Maple School, too, has a highly trained paraprofessional staff. As the assistant principal explained, "We have a trained para doing numeracy, the Richardson model, helping with number sets. And we have another para who is solely trained on the Wilson Foundation program." In addition to the professional development paraeducators received through the school, a special educator at Maple School commented on the strong educational background many paraprofessionals brought to the job. She said, "We're very fortunate in that we have people with bachelor's degrees, college experience."

The background and training of the paraprofessionals in these schools allow them to take on increased instructional responsibility and therefore more fully support classroom teachers. There was a great deal of alignment between the work of the paraeducators and teachers and the two groups reported communicating constantly. As paraprofessionals at Spruce School noted, "We are familiar with the curriculum. It is more like team teaching." A third grade teacher mentioned how invaluable this type of support is describing the paraprofessional in her room as, "a second set of hands, a second voice…somebody who has worked in your room for a few years and knows your routines and your ways and can easily jump in and be a part of what's going on…somebody else that the children see that they can go to." The assistant principal of Maple School remarked that, "The use of paraprofessionals can help extend the teacher talents. They can supplement or they can help differentiate the instruction. Well-trained paraeducators, who are directed, who do professional development, who read articles, who watch teachers teach, who know the curriculum…help certainly with the teaching process." A special educator

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Although staff at all three schools are committed to working with one another, a common challenge cited by many was the need for more structured collaboration time. This was true even at Maple School which has the most formalized vehicle for teacher collaboration, a daily time block from 3:00-4:00pm. Although they share this common period, teachers expressed a desire to have their students go to special classes, like art and music, at the same time in order to free up yet more time for collaboration, particularly across grade levels. A third grade teacher commented that, "What I think everybody would like to see is vertical teaming so that we meet with the second grade periodically and we meet with the fourth grade periodically. It's been talked about but it's never been organized." A kindergarten teacher added, "We have lots of classrooms visiting different specials so that's when it would be a nice time to get together. But we don't all have our kids gone at the same time so that's definitely a challenge. I think they tried but it just, it was impossible (due to scheduling)."

The problem is more pronounced at Spruce School. There, a creative arts teacher said, "There's no structured time (for collaboration). We have to make it happen." A sixth grade teacher agreed. "You mentioned more structured time for planning? Yes. Sign us up for that so we can get home (before) 6:30pm." The bulk of the collaboration that takes place at Spruce School is the result of teachers willingly giving up their lunch break or before/after school time to work together. As a fifth grade teacher summarized, "Schools rely so much on individual dedication and the more that's cut into in terms of time and people, the more difficult it becomes." Teachers seemed to support the creation of a structured block of time that would allow them to continue their collaborative efforts consistently, without relying solely on fellow teachers' good will and dedication. Finally, staff at Spruce also supported more coverage in their classroom so they could observe their colleagues. A fifth grade teacher commented, "Personally I think that we should do more of that (observation of each others' teaching) and we don't really have a formal set-up for that. That would be very helpful. Part of it is that we don't have a lot of bodies to come in (to cover your classroom) while you go." At Pine Tree School, the issue was less related to time in the school day and more to the challenges of having only one teacher per grade. While there was abundant collaboration across grade levels at the school, not having another grade-level specialist on staff, or the time to seek out colleagues at other schools, was a burden for some teachers. As a first grade teacher explained, "I don't think I have enough time to collaborate with other first grade teachers just because of the school size and there's only one of me." △

at the school agreed saying, "Having your paras trained, they're your line of defense. If something's happening, the fact that they can use the same language as the teacher and a special educator… is a really strong asset."

Finally, in addition to valuing the support provided by paraprofessionals, ensuring that they are adequately trained, and tightly connecting their work with that of classroom teachers, these schools used paraeducators' time creatively to maximize their impact. All three schools have attempted to shift from a model that solely pairs paraeducators with individual students to a model that allows them to work with multiple students or entire groups, thereby more effectively supporting the classroom teacher. As the special educator at Spruce School said, while "they (paraprofessionals) are tied in primarily with students receiving special education, they're also there to support all kids." Pine Tree School has been deliberate in its attempts to make certain that paraeducators have the chance to work with a variety of students and teachers. The Reading Recovery teacher commented that, "A paraprofessional doesn't always stay with the same class every single year. People are mixed up and used in different ways so that everyone gets to know all of the kids in the school. With paras moving around, (seeing) different students and getting different trainings, and then being able to help with the intervention piece, that's made a big difference for our school." Likewise, the assistant principal of Maple School has made a concerted effort to broaden paraprofessionals' responsibility from a focus on individual children. She said, "Even though there are youngsters that require supervision, that supervision generally now has become shared because it's obvious if someone is absent, you want someone else who's comfortable to that role. You want to prevent burnout. You want the youngster to have the greatest number of positive relationships as possible." The principal added that the assistant principal's "famous question when we interview paras is, how flexible are you? Because they never know where they might be at any given moment."

It is not only in-school time when paraprofessionals play key roles. Interestingly, paraeducators either staffed or ran the after school program at all three schools. At Pine Tree, paraprofessionals also worked with students during the summer school program. Teachers saw this as a huge benefit for children. One said, "It's really nice that the volunteers for the after school program are also the paras who work with the kids throughout the school day (because) they have been in the room during the time of instruction. I will go up and really quickly say, here's what we did today, here's what they need to work on for homework. Can you help them? And they know what I'm talking about because they were in the room for some of the instruction at the time." A paraprofessional at the school agreed saying, "We also see these kids for the after school program so we can carry on the language and help kids. Having that extra link—five of the paras work in the after school program—(is helpful)." ▲

chapter six
Student supports

Effective systems have a comprehensive and highly functioning support system in place to address students' academic, emotional, behavioral, and social needs.

"We're here to educate kids. We look at kids' needs. We meet those needs of kids, be they physical needs, emotional needs, (or) behavioral needs. But we don't meet those needs because we're nice people. We may be nice people but that's not why we do it. We do it so that we can get kids to a place where they can then learn the stuff that we want to teach them. That's the philosophy here."

- PRINCIPAL, MAPLE SCHOOL

First and foremost, the mission of these schools is to meet students' academic needs. However, they recognize that in order to do so, they must simultaneously respond to students' emotional, physical, and social needs—needs that are often exacerbated by the challenges of the life in poverty many students lead. As a result, each of the three schools has developed a comprehensive system of wraparound services to support the wide range of student needs. Their menu of support options is wide and varied, ranging from purely academic to behavioral and emotional. On the academic side, these schools have implemented strong, effective Educational Support Teams (ESTs), emphasized literacy skills and put early intervention programs in place, and created comprehensive after school programs that include an academic component. On the social, emotional, and physical side, these schools have created safe spaces for students to retreat during the school day for additional support, hired an impressive cadre of support professionals, including guidance counselors, nurses, and home school coordinators, and increased students' access to healthy, nutritious food. It should be noted that schools' ESTs also served to address non-academic struggles. A sriking characteristic of the support systems in these schools—both academic and otherwise—is the speed with which they are able to detect and respond to students' needs. Students are not allowed to fall through the cracks but are constantly monitored to determine if and when they might require additional attention.

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ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

Highly effective EST

An important component of the schools' academic, as well as broader, support system is their educational support team. The EST process in these schools is effective, in part, because it has established clear norms, roles, and responsibilities. Due to their large size, ESTs at Maple School are organized by grade level. As the school's speech language pathologist explained, "Each grade level has their own EST so all the kindergarten teachers are the EST team for kindergarten kids. They pick one person to facilitate the meetings. If there's a concern with language, they'll invite me to a meeting, but…teachers are responsible for maintaining them. They are the core team." She described the teams as "very functional and very effective." First grade teachers explained how the process unfolds. "We have a very intense EST system in place. Of course, we're starting in our classroom first, trying things with kids. But then (if that's not successful), we're right with our grade level (EST) team informally brainstorming how to improve things for kids or what techniques might help them. We're very quick on it. If something's not working, (we) go through our EST process and get something formally in place. Often it's a service from another person (like) the speech language pathologist." She added, "Our school is really good about utilizing special educators during EST…so we don't have to wait for (students) to qualify necessarily to get all the help they need." A second grade teacher noted that sometimes she "invite(s) the teacher from the previous grade or teacher from next year to provide continuity." And it is not only fellow teachers or specialized service providers that attend. A first grade teacher mentioned that, "I have an EST where we invite (the student's) therapist and their case manager. The student is in foster care, so we make sure to include everybody who's working with the child and needs to be informed whether they're within the school or not." The assistant principal at Maple School plays a role in guaranteeing that the work of the ESTs is high quality and that teams are keeping appropriate documentation. The school's speech language pathologist explained that, "In the summer (the assistant principal) goes through all of the EST files. If the appropriate documentation isn't there, she lets those teams know in the fall (and says) you need to get better with this. We're pretty good because (we) know now that this file is going to get looked at. We always talk about it at the beginning of the year, what the expectation is for ESTs."

The EST at Spruce School meets every Tuesday morning before school. Their process is similar to Maple's although ESTs do not exist at every grade level because the school is smaller. Rather, there is a core group of staff that participates in every EST meeting. According to the guidance counselor, "The team includes a learning specialist, the principal, myself, and the Reading Recovery teacher. We invite the teacher (and) the parents. Very often we have the children sit in on the meetings if they're older or able developmentally to and that's been wonderful." A first grade teacher noted that, as at Maple School, ESTs often invite the child's physician to attend, as well, to offer another perspective. The principal said, "The local pediatrician has been a regular member for about four years since about 80 percent of the kids go to him. His insight has been great. For some kids that we're really scratching our heads on, he would (reveal that) there were prenatal issues. It is amazing how that kind of (information helps)." As for the process the group uses, a fourth grade teacher explained that, "Any teacher can call an EST meeting if you have a concern about a student. You do all the paperwork, fill out your concerns, and then the meeting is

scheduled. You can write down the names of other people that you feel would be good to have at the meeting. Oftentimes the parents come to the meetings and (the student's teacher from) last year will sometimes come (too). And then you brainstorm, what are the child's successes, what are the child's challenges, why was he or she brought to the EST, and what's going to be done." A critical step that happens before the meeting is convened, however, is the collection of data on the student in question. The guidance counselor said, "When a child is referred to the EST, we collect all the data that's available. Their report cards for the last three years are included, along with any NECAP scores or POAs…and work samples. That is all copied and distributed to the members of the team…at least a week in advance so they have time to review it and observe the child in the classroom or in other settings." A kindergarten teacher at Spruce School remarked that one of the strengths of the school's EST system is that support for students is ongoing and their progress monitored. She said, "It's not just a one shot deal. There's follow-up in terms of what the plan is and how is it working." A fourth grade teacher added that, "That plan does follow the child. Each year, we're asked to review the plan and state whether we're just continuing with that plan or if we need to meet again."

At Pine Tree School, the smallest of the three schools, the EST meets about once a month or on an as-needed basis. This is, in part, because the co-chair of the EST, the school's guidance counselor, only works part-time since her services are shared across two schools. The principal, the other co-chair, facilitates the meetings. She also asks that, "Referrals go through me because I want to (see) what actions have already been taken prior to the referral." The guidance counselor manages all paperwork. As the special educator explained, "She takes the notes during the meetings and then delineates who does what job. Then she checks in with us after a couple of days to find out where we're at." The rest of the team consists of those staff members who work with the child or have information to bear on the situation. The principal noted that in many cases, several teachers will attend an EST meeting. Since the school is so small and teachers know the students so well, a kindergarten teacher can be a real asset to an EST meeting about a fifth grade student. As the principal explained, "When we look at somebody in fifth grade, the kindergarten teacher can say, you know, this was something he struggled (with) back (when I taught him). If somebody gets referred (to the EST) in third grade, I've got the kindergarten teacher on the team. I've got the fourth grade teacher on it. They all know these kids." Similar to the other two schools, the staff at Pine Tree School made a point of emphasizing the work they do with students in the classroom before referring them to the EST. A fourth grade teacher said, "We try all kinds of different strategies first. We try everything we possibly can. We usually talk to special education teacher, the reading consultant, sometimes the math (consultant), depending on the area of need. Then we fill out a form and bring it (to the EST). It's quite intense, the form. The classroom teacher goes to the group and presents it. We bring in proof of where the child is struggling and then we'll go from there…with ideas or further testing or wherever the need is." A fifth and sixth grade teacher agreed about the intensity of the process saying, "It's really pretty intensive when you refer someone. You have to say, these are all the things we've already done and (you have to) write it all out. I have this page of documentation on all the things I've tried with this student this year and (the child) is not making as much progress as I'd like to see" Her colleague noted the speed with which the EST typically responds to student needs. She said, "They certainly stay on top of things. They don't let it drag. They address the problem and they act quickly on it."

Early literacy support and pre-kindergarten

Another way these schools support students academically is through their strong focus on literacy skills, particularly in the early grades. They have realized that providing students with foundational reading and writing skills is essential if they are to thrive in other subjects. These schools assess early and often and provide whatever interventions are necessary to ensure that students are developing appropriate language, vocabulary, and comprehension skills. As a second grade teacher at Spruce School commented, "We hit literacy hard in kindergarten through third grade. We need to get them reading. There is a strong push to get everyone on grade level by the end of third grade." Similarly, a local school board member at Pine Tree School noted that, "I think the reason the kids do so well is the stress (the school) has on reading from an early age. Reading is stressed so much."

At Pine Tree, students who have difficulty are detected quickly and supported. The principal described how a new student moved into the community and was "struggling with (concepts like) time and money. So we've already got her extra help three days a week and hopefully we can fill in those holes with her. I really think that those early interventions are key. Fifteen minutes might help a kindergartner because in fourth grade it (would take) an hour. My advice to other schools? Have early interventions." A first grade teacher agreed. "It's harder by the time you catch kids in fourth, fifth, and sixth. It's a lot easier to be proactive in the earlier grades when they're first starting."

Maple School shared a similar philosophy around early detection and intervention. In fact, the district superintendent encouraged principals to, "look at their budgets and move resources down to preschool, kindergarten, first, second, and third grade so that we don't have to do remediation in the upper grades." The speech language pathologist at the school described her work with early struggling learners. "I serve kindergarteners, first graders, and all the way up through but more so kindergarten and first graders because I know if I address those problems that are going to interfere with reading early on, I won't have those kids

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Schools cited several ongoing challenges related to student support including availability and access to high-quality early education, the need for gifted/talented programs, and the transience of some of their students as well as the challenging and sometimes traumatic life experiences students bring to school.

EARLY EDUCATION

All three schools mentioned ongoing challenges with the availability of early education programs, a critical stepping stone for students, particularly low-income students. As mentioned earlier, the principal of Spruce School strongly wants a four-year old program offered at his school. He is worried about the approximately one-third of kindergarteners who come to school with no formal educational experience at all. As a second grade teacher said, "So many students come from homes where they haven't been read to. Preschool is the best orientation." Similarly, the principal at Maple School feels passionately about the need for a school-based pre-school program. As he explained, many students who come to kindergarten have limited educational experience. "A lot of them have been nowhere and even those kids who have been in daycare, it's daycare. It's nothing beyond that so it's becoming a crucial thing." The supervisory union/district early education coordinator corroborated this saying, "We have a large number of children who are in unlicensed and unregulated care." The curriculum coordinator also mentioned the importance of providing transportation for an early education program, if one is ever implemented at the school.

Pine Tree, the only school that currently offers pre-school, still noted some challenges when it came to early education. For one, transportation for pre-school is not provided. As one parent explained, "A big issue is transportation. Parents have to provide transportation both ways for pre-school. Some parents come in from some distance to get here." She shared that a friend in the community was unable to have her child join the pre-school program because transportation was a barrier. Similarly, transportation is only provided one way to the school's kindergarten program posing issues for working parents or those without a car. Since the school is located in a very rural area, public transportation is not an option. Finally, there are some who would like to see the kindergarten expand from a half-day. As one parent said, "I wish it was a full-day program. My child would have really benefited from a full-day experience." The school's Reading Recovery teacher agreed. "I really want to see more time with kindergarten. I can't see kindergarten because it's half days and their schedule is full as it is. I'd like to see all-day kindergarten come. I would love to see that happen so our kids have more exposure to the social parts too. But that (requires) money and space and people."

GIFTED AND TALENTED PROGRAMS

Another ongoing challenge for two of the three schools was meeting the needs of gifted students. The Reading Recovery teacher at Pine Tree School said, "I wish we had a gifted and talented program here and we don't. We never have the funds or the time or the people to do it. I just think every system can get better in every way. I don't think anybody's perfect." A fourth

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later." She felt it was critical to "get right into kindergarten, find those kids, (and provide) that early intervention. The research tells us that if the kids have significantly phonological (problems), they're going to struggle with reading and writing. So getting into those kindergarteners is really important." The positive outcomes of the school's early intervention efforts were hailed by third grade teachers. "Students are picked up so quickly. Their problems are figured out and noticed quickly."

To ensure that staff are capable of providing the reading and writing interventions students require, all three schools have either internal or external literacy coaches who assist classroom teachers and paraprofessionals improve their content knowledge and pedagogical skills. In addition, all three schools have at least one Reading Recovery teacher on staff. Their expertise is credited with helping many children overcome early literacy problems. As a teacher at Spruce School said, "What I see here (that is different) from other schools is the amount of student support. We have *three* Reading Recovery teachers. For this school size, I think we have a very large support staff for our students." A third grade teacher agreed, saying, "There has been tremendous support put into literacy with a lot of time vested in training of teachers, be it Reading Recovery, or any number of other initiatives. The training has been in-depth and it's continuous." In fact, the principal has asked regular classroom teachers to become trained as Reading Recovery teachers and moved Reading Recovery teachers back into the regular classroom to build the entire staff's knowledge of best literacy practices. The three Reading Recovery teachers form a literacy team that, along with K-3 classroom teachers, meets weekly. Pine Tree School, the smallest of the three schools, also employs a Reading Recovery teacher who does triple duty. As the principal explained, "We have a Reading Recovery teacher (who is) also our Title I teacher (and) our literacy leader." She added, "I'm a huge believer in Reading Recovery." In addition to multiple Reading Recovery teachers, Maple School has three Title I reading specialists on staff.

While these schools credit early detection and support with helping catch struggling learners, they want to do even more. The final frontier for early intervention, according to these schools, is pre-kindergarten. Young children in these three communities, except for Pine Tree School which hosts a pre-kindergarten program on site, have vastly different early learning experiences. As a kindergarten teacher at Spruce School commented, "I have students that literally will write their name and draw a picture of themselves and (others) that are ready to write a book." The principal agreed saying, "Kindergarten is probably one of the most differentiated just because of where the kids are coming from." Kindergarteners at Spruce School generally have had one of three experiences prior to entering school: daycare with no substantive

academic component (33 percent), formal preschool (33 percent), or home with family (33 percent). Kindergarten teachers reported that some students who primarily stayed at home with family never had any educational enrichment at all prior to entering school. As a result, if the principal had a magic wand, he "would like to have a four year old program" at the school. He explained that, "getting the kids earlier and in some sort of formal setting…even if it's just a couple of hours, a couple of days a week…would provide them some supports. There are an awful lot of kids who come in and know all kinds of TV shows and video games (but) know nothing about books."

A school-based pre-kindergarten program is also on the agenda of the principal at Maple School. In fact, he is convinced adding such a program is the only way to truly close the poverty-based achievement gap saying, "I think that's the primary thing we need to close that gap. Kids who are in that lower socio-economic strata are coming to us, some with no preschool experience whatsoever. And those, for the most part, are the kids with really severe language and experiential deficits. If kids come in far enough behind, we've got until third grade. It becomes harder and harder (after that). So we've been trying for a number of years to do a universal preschool and have run into lots of roadblocks outside of this building so our next step is to look inside of this building." The local school board chair seemed supportive of the initiative saying, "Maple School has had a full day kindergarten (for several years) and we have seen improvements with the children in first grade and second grade since going to the full-day program. We are now looking at the future and thinking that it would be nice to house early childhood, preschool here. We're working toward that goal."

Until that becomes a reality, the school is doing what it can to reach out to early education providers in the area. As the district's early education coordinator observed, "We need to make some kind of early investment before the children arrive in kindergarten." He described some of the school's efforts. "Maple School, for example, sends kindergarten teachers to the early childhood programs to observe the children who will be going into kindergarten the coming year so that they get a head start in understanding what the children's needs are. We share screening information with (the teachers) prior to the children's arrival in kindergarten. It's done on an individual child scale, not just on a broader scale." The kindergarten teachers appreciate the time they are given to visit early education providers and interact with students prior to their entering kindergarten. "If we know we're assigned a student from a program that is very needy in one way or another, our administration will allow subs to come in for us so that we can go see that child in that setting, meet with who's working with them, and learn best practice things for that student."

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grade teacher at Pine Tree School agreed noting, "Because we're so small, we don't always have the monies to support extending the program to gifted children. We don't have the monies to have more programs come in like some of the larger schools." The superintendent at Spruce School also mentioned that the school "has been criticized for not meeting the needs of gifted and talented kids" but said it is an area they intend to focus on in the future.

STUDENT TRANSIENCE AND CHALLENGES OF LIFE IN POVERTY

Final challenges noted by all three schools were the transient nature of their student population as well as the traumatic life experiences of some students, particularly those growing up in low-income households. First and foremost, all three schools reported highly transitory student populations. This is not surprising since all three communities had sizeable numbers of low-income families and frequent moving is more common among those struggling to find work and affordable housing. The supervisory union/district early education coordinator for Maple School explained the pattern into which some families fall. "There are two communities (in the region) that offer the most affordable housing. It's not quality housing but it's the most affordable. So we have many families who move up and down the state. They will be evicted in (one town so) they will go to (the other town). They will stay until they get evicted there, and then they'll come back and find a different apartment. So transience is a huge issue." The assistant principal confirmed this saying, "Five years ago, I was keeping track of (transience) and there were two years where we had one-third of our population moving in and moving out." The principal noted that it is "very, very hard to maintain consistency when that happens. But that's what we've got so that's what we're going to have to deal with." He added, "I think preschool will go a long way in that." Spruce School also reported a high degree of transience among its students. A kindergarten teacher said, "I'm back up to 16 (students) but I've had three move (out) and two move in so it is constantly changing. This is the first year that mine has stayed as constant as it has. I've had some years where there have been seven or eight changes in the course of a year." The school's guidance counselor added, "We have a large transient population with a lot of kids moving in and out regularly. The teachers are great about trying to stop and rebuild community when that happens." Pine Tree School, too, noted this problem. A supervisory union/district staff member commented that, "Another challenge is there is somewhat of a mobile population so it doesn't take too many kids moving into (the school) to make a big change in the make-up of a class or the whole school in general."

Whether the result of transience or of the general struggles of life in poverty, these schools also noted the difficult life circumstances of some of the children they serve. The principal of Spruce School commented that the mental health needs of children in his community are increasing saying, "We're seeing a lot more family stressors over the last couple of years…more kids just breaking down and a lot of tears. (We) focus on trying to get

continued on page 44 »

« continued from page 43

the kids in a more stable situation and get them supports." The school's guidance counselor added, "It amazes me how much these children have been exposed to in their years. There are certain areas of town where it's not unusual to find needles on the ground, which, in a rural area, you don't expect to see. And we're seeing more and more violence right now…and more substances." The school nurse mentioned the importance of addressing students' mental health needs saying, "When I look at the kids who are at risk, there is (often) a mental health issue in the home whether it be a parent, a sibling or the child themselves…that's not being addressed effectively. So home-school coordination is the big factor…with the specific goal of meeting that mental health issues."

A special educator at Pine Tree School made similar observations about her school. "From my perspective as a special educator, we're receiving more and more low-income families with kids who really struggle in a lot of learning domains. Kids come in with rare genetic syndromes, witness domestic issues, divorced families, just early life trauma, or difficulty from birth with growth and development and we need resources to support those kids. You can't pick up any one teaching catalogue and say this is how you handle this new rare genetic diagnosis. They don't come out of the box with an owner's manual of how to help those kids. So I think it's important that we plan ahead and have money to have the kind of resource(s) (children require)." The principal at the school expressed concern over the lack of interventionists at the school to support students in the way the special educator identified. She said, "I see all the personnel and resources being added at other schools. Last year, I did a little survey of all the schools in our district of who had math/reading or behavior interventionists. I went home and said to my husband, I don't know how we're going to meet all of the needs because we will never have these kinds of resources. So when we have more of a need, what are we going to do? (He said), if you have a need, be creative and so we try to be but (it) is a real challenge, especially as our population is changing." △

Pine Tree School is the only school of the three that currently has a pre-kindergarten program in place. Most of the young children in the area attend although the principal is still determined to attract the handful of students that receive early childhood care elsewhere. She believes having all incoming kindergarteners attend the school's pre-kindergarten assures them a common foundation in the skills and content they need and makes for a wonderful transition to kindergarten. "It's better to have them go somewhere, even if it's not your preschool, but I really like them here."

After school and summer school programs

In addition to reaching kids at a younger age, these schools are committed to holding on to them for longer. They have recognized that they can provide additional academic support and enrichment to their students by extending the school day. All three offer an after school program to students as well as a summer program. The after school programs at these schools balance academic and extracurricular pursuits so that while students are supported in their schoolwork, they also have a chance to experience an array of other enrichment activities.

The after school program coordinator at Pine Tree School described the success of their program, which is funded by a 21st Century grant. She said, "I think adding the after school program is certainly a plus, especially for the free and reduced lunch children because they have a really safe place to stay. (The program is offered for) fourth, fifth, and sixth graders. (Out of 59) kids, I have 55 of them signed up to do something in the after school program. It's something that they really, really, want to do. So that's pretty exciting." The staff of the after school program (which includes paraprofessionals) work closely with classroom teachers to align the academic component of the afternoon. A fifth grade teacher at the school said, "We talk about the after school program and how it can support where the students are lacking. So there's a carry through." The program's coordinator agreed saying, "Everything in the after school program is the same as school, the same expectations. So there's a nice follow through there." The school's math consultant appreciates the alignment of in-school and out-of-school time. She commented, "It's phenomenal…the use of children's time at the end of the day." The program coordinator explained that, "(It has) helped kids a lot. Kids that would come in and every day not have their homework done…now they come to the classroom with homework done and they're feeling good about themselves."

Maple Tree School also offers an extensive after school program, five days a week from 3:00-5:00pm, that includes free transportation. It is targeted at the younger grades. The

local school board chair was very complimentary of the program saying, "I think our after school program is an excellent example of how we have extended the school day. We have excellent participation." The first hour of the program focuses on academics, particularly homework completion. Sixth grade teachers felt that the academic component was particularly strong because of the crossover in staff from the school day to the program. One said, "Many of the people who are in the homework program are knowledgeable about what the curriculum is and what they can do to help." Many teachers also reported using their 3:00-4:00pm block periodically to assist students in the after school program with their homework. In fact, for the first hour of the program, students meet in classrooms so they have access to their teachers (if they are available). It is not only in the afternoons that teachers make themselves accessible to students. Special educators at the school have initiated a homework group study first thing in the morning. One special educator explained, "It's their choice to come in here. I call it the homework club and they come in and we serve them breakfast."

Spruce School offers a homework club after school for fourth, fifth, and sixth graders staffed by paraprofessionals. Also available to students each day of the week is an after school program sponsored by the local YMCA which operates out of the school. The person in charge of the student support center at the school runs the YMCA program so there is strong alignment between classroom activities and program activities, including support for homework.

While one strong component of the after school programs in these schools is academic, students are also given a chance to participate in activities and visit places that enrich their lives more broadly. Some of the students these schools serve, particularly low-income students, do not necessarily have the opportunity to experience certain activities. So the schools have tried to fill those gaps and expose children to a wide array of people, places, and things through their after school initiatives. As a first grade teacher at Maple School explained, "They do homework and reading there…but a lot of what they do is enrichment. There's an exercise time. They go snowshoeing, they go swimming, they're out hiking, they're in the woods." She added, "We hire people to come and just enrich them outside because many of our students only see outside if they come to school…at the bus stop. And that is it. So it's so wonderful and marvelous to see these children out doing something you know (they might not otherwise) get to do…which is very helpful to them." The paraprofessionals at the school made similar observations about the value of the enrichment portion of the program. One said, "Kids get to experience things that they would never get to experience otherwise…the iRock gym and other physical excursions. It involves academics but also helps kids become involved in their community. The things they do amaze me." The assistant principal was also very aware that some students did not have the same opportunities as their peers. She said, we strive to "provide…experiential knowledge and—we're talking about kids in poverty—enrichment, not enrichment like gifted and talented but enrichment in their life. There's a piano that was donated to us in the cafeteria that we had tuned. I want to find someone who knows how to play the piano so every youngster can come up and sit at that piano and learn how to do the scales…and just give them that experience."

Spruce School also includes an enrichment component in their after school program but has worked to integrate experiential learning opportunities into the regular curriculum, as well, through their place-based education program. The program strives to give students a chance to experience new people, places, and activities as well as learn more about their local community. The principal explained that, "We've had a place-based educator for about six years. He's here 90 days a year, and that's been a great…change in the academic focus in the classroom." The place-based coordinator described the philosophy and purpose of the program. "It's not just about education or academics. It's about skills for life. It's about being a part of the community. (It champions) another type of learning besides textbook learning because not all kids are good at textbook learning. (It's about) recognizing that there are many different ways to learn something and if you try enough strategies, you'll find what works for kids." Students are given a chance to try hands-on learning, to experience the outdoors, and to explore the surrounding area where they live. As a second grade teacher said, the program "gives them a connection to the earth and to the community. Our town is indeed a special place to live. Many kids wouldn't have the opportunity to do this otherwise." Some of the many activities students have the chance to experience are growing and harvesting their own garden (the bounty is used in the cafeteria), building an outdoor amphitheatre for the school, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, hiking, animal tracking. The place-based coordinator pointed out that he works closely with classroom teachers to align his curriculum both with the Grade Expectations and with content they are covering in class so that while the program offers students new ways to access learning, there is synergy with the regular academic curriculum. Literacy specialists at the school attested to the program's success. "One of the things again that I think has been a success for kids is the place-based education (program). The connection between the outside world (and) the school classroom has been an integral part of the success. Having been in the classroom and seen the difference with kids, (I can say) it truly has been a great program to have."

Emotional, behavioral, and social supports

These schools are cognizant of the need to support students emotionally, physically, and socially in addition to academically. Too often, the children they serve face challenging home situations and other personal stressors and are not available to learn when they enter school each day. Addressing their non-academic needs

helps them achieve in the classroom. As the assistant principal of Maple School explained, "(Our students) may have some hard times and barriers and not feel safe when they're not in school. We work to try and resolve those issues be it with guidance, be it with home-school coordinators, be it with family support mechanisms (like) inter-agency meetings and treatment teams, etc. (so that kids know) when you're here in school, you have all of these people rooting for you."

These schools pursued several strategies for addressing the wide range of student needs they encounter in addition to addressing identified issues through their ESTs. Each school established a safe place for children to go during the day for additional emotional or behavioral support, generally referred to as a student support center. In addition, each school employed a cadre of support professionals including at least one point person who students knew they could trust and seek out for additional assistance. In some cases, this person worked with students' families, as well. Besides these two approaches, schools worked to provide students access to healthy food throughout the day.

Student support center

One of the ways schools supported students' emotional and behavioral needs was through a student support center. Spruce School found that this resource helped students process any personal stress or frustration they may have come to school with so that they could be contributing members of their class. A fifth grade teacher described the connection between student behavior and achievement. "I think the academic is tied to the social. A lot of times (when) kids are having academic difficulty, it's tied to the fact that when they went home last night, x, y and z (happened)." The student support center attempts to respond to what students experience outside school so that they can participate meaningfully in school. A first grade teacher explained, "We have a full-time student support center. Sometimes (students go for) behavior issues (or because they) need a quiet spot. I think that is a huge service to our kids. It's just a different environment. We have kids who will ask to go there. They know (they're) reaching a boiling point or need a quieter spot." A kindergarten teacher agreed. "There are a lot of emotional needs. For the last few years, kids really seem to be coming in more troubled. If we didn't have things in place (to) take care of those kids, they are totally disruptive. They can go (to the center), process for awhile, and settle back down into the class. It makes a world of difference."

In addition to the student support center and the dedicated staff person who works there, all teachers at Spruce School have adopted the Responsive Classroom® model and the "buddy room" system that it espouses. A sixth grade teacher described the idea. "Responsive Classroom® has what is called the buddy room. We have (ours) set up with the fourth grade. If (students) need space or we (decide) they need to be out of the room, then they go to the fourth grade room and there's a designated seat or spot in the room for them." A first grade teacher added, "We all have a spot in the room for that thinking time. We will share that with other classrooms so if a child needs to go to another spot they can come to our classroom to get themselves together, away from the others."

At Maple School, students can access the conflict resolution room. Staffed full-time by someone with training in conflict resolution, it allows students to discuss problems they are having and learn how to manage their own behavior. As a first grade teacher explained, "We use that (room) as a last resort, if we need extra help (or to) process with the kids. Some days they just really need a quiet space to get focused again…so we would use that." The room's staff person also runs a peer mediation group and trains fifth and sixth graders to become mediators.

Pine Tree School reported fewer students with emotional problems or severe behavior problems. However, the staff, after attending a BEST Institute, made the decision several years ago to transform the teachers' lounge into a planning room, a space for students who needed additional support during the school day. As the principal explained, it was a conscious decision by the teachers to do what was best for the students, not necessarily the adults in the building. The room is staffed by a trained para-educator in the morning and afternoon and when not processing with students, they provide small group and individual tutoring. While some teachers reportedly missed the lounge, they appreciate having a quiet space for students who need it.

Cadre of support professionals with one or more key people

Each school had its own all-star line-up of support professionals. While the players changed slightly from site to site, they shared a commitment to meeting the needs of students and doing whatever was required to ensure they were socially and emotionally secure. A fifth grade teacher described the team at Spruce School. "There's a lot of support in this school. We have a student support center, a school counselor and a school nurse, as well as the special education team (that is) focused on the social and emotional side of things as well. So there's a lot of support for kids. In poverty, a lot of those things sometimes are missing. You can't generalize…but kids come into our classroom having difficulties because they didn't have breakfast, because their parents are having difficulties or are in difficult situations, (or because) they're moving around after school (and) don't even know where they're going to go. There is a lot of support for them at school. We help out so that they can get back into the classroom and function at an appropriate level."

In addition to a strong support team, each school seemed to have one point person whose name was mentioned time and time again as someone students trusted or who was pivotal in

providing supports to children and families. At Spruce School, this person was the school nurse. A sixth grade teacher went so far as to say that she thought the nurse was one of the primary reasons for the school's success. She said, "We have a full-time nurse too and I think she's one of the reasons that the kids can succeed here. She is a guidance counselor, a nurse, a social worker, community liaison. She does home visits for kids. It's remarkable. She's really involved in the community (and serves on) health committees. Nobody thinks of the nurse when you think of your test scores going up, but here, she's definitely an integral part of that." The principal agreed. "(She has a) connection with a lot of families. They see her as a resource. She's the chair of the local child protection team and (has) connections with other agencies. We'll get phone calls or we'll hear from the kids that the state police were at (somebody's) house last night and having a team that's able to respond to that (is helpful). The nurse is somebody that sees a lot of stomachaches that have nothing to do with stomachs. She is extremely valuable." One of the school's literacy specialists added, "She is an integral part in our emotional well being. She's not just a dispenser of band aids. She always has her antennae up for the emotional needs of staff or of people in the community and that's a huge, huge (benefit)." And the nurse does not only care for students and staff. She also provides direct assistance to families. A second grade teacher explained, "She goes above and beyond her typical job. If transportation is an issue or if a parent is not able to get a child out of bed in the morning, she will go to their house to get them up." The nurse herself discussed her role and the support she strives to provide students, staff, and families. "We make an effort to connect. The kids who aren't in school…if the parent hasn't called in, we call to make sure what's going on and (ask if they) need any support. I go and get kids (if they) missed the bus or mom overslept. We try to make sure that every child gets to school. If a child needs to see a doctor and the parents are not available during the day or there's no transportation, then we provide that service."

The team of support professionals at Maple School was also impressive. Many of the teachers and staff at Maple School expressed amazement at the number of support people available to students and the comprehensiveness of the team the school had in place. As one staff member exclaimed, "(We have) full-time staffing in many areas that others don't have…the guidance counselor, academic support (Reading Recovery, special education), a home-school coordinator, a guidance counselor, a behavior specialist." The school also employs a full-time speech pathologist. As the behavior specialist herself commented, "Folks here, as compared to other schools I have worked in, know how to use and stretch their resources in order to support each child and their needs. This school has a broad spectrum of available resources here in this school (and) all of these people are available for every kid." The assistant principal remarked on the depth of support available to students. "To hear a listing of the staffing that we have here and to realize…(they are) under our own roof, these services, and work as a team."

One person mentioned repeatedly as a resource was the school's guidance counselor. The principal said, "I've done two things right in my academic career. One was to apply to Maple School and the second was to hire (our guidance counselor). Much of the credit of this place goes to her. She is the soul of this place, no question about it." As the supervisory union/district curriculum coordinator commented, "She's totally involved with every child in this school." A teacher at the school noted how, "A lot of kids come in and see her. That's how they start their morning which I think really helps." The principal also reported that she does a great deal of work to communicate regularly with parents and involve them in their child's learning. Another point person at Maple School is the home-school coordinator, who also interfaces with parents. The supervisory union/district early education coordinator described the work of the home-school coordinator saying, "(She) has been a critical piece of their success here. Oftentimes a child will be absent because lack of transportation or because the family's having difficulty and can't get the kid on the bus. The home-school coordinator is allowed to leave the four walls and go and meet with the family, bring them in, provide transportation to them. It's a wonderful approach." Kindergarten teachers felt strongly that the support the home-school coordinator provided was particularly helpful for low-income families. "I find our home-school coordinator really makes a big difference with the low income children…to get that communication between home and school and to build a relationship." They described one specific incident where the home-school coordinator played an instrumental role. "I'm thinking of one little boy in particular. If I don't think he's had his medications (in the) morning, all I have to do is talk to her (the coordinator). She calls mom (and) makes sure everything's in place. It's just a wonderful resource to have her to be able to contact the parent. She has a wonderful relationship with these parents because she has the time to visit."

… each school seemed to have one point person whose name was mentioned time and time again as someone students trusted or who was pivotal in providing supports to children and families.

At Pine Tree School, the support team was more limited than that of the other two schools because of the school's small size. In fact, most of the support professionals only worked at the school

on a part-time basis. As the principal explained, the guidance counselor works three days a week and the school psychologist is on site two days a week. Piecing the two schedules together the principal said, "We've got coverage five days a week for emotional and mental health issues." Even with limited resources, the school does its best to respond to any and all student needs. For example, the guidance counselor holds "lunch bunch" meetings on days she is at the school. These meetings allow students to have lunch with her and talk about any issues they might be experiencing. The guidance counselor also runs "friendship groups" that enable students to, according to the principal, "get to know her (and) get to know some other kids really well." A teacher at the school reported that the friendship groups are "really good just for kids socially, behaviorally. It teaches a lot of those social skills and how to interact with people so that they can learn better in a classroom setting and be able to interact the way they're supposed to." These friendship groups are especially helpful for students new to the school. The guidance counselor also provides individual counseling sessions. Finally, she assists with school-wide programs like Vermont Kids against Tobacco, Girls on the Run, and the school's walking program. Because of the school's small size, it did not seem that there was one particular person students turned to for support. However, each teacher reported a strong rapport with students. The small number of students enabled the school's support to be personalized and individualized.

Access to healthy food

Another strategy these schools pursued to meet the physical needs of students was to provide them with healthy food throughout the day. Making sure that children eat a balanced, nutritious diet can be a challenge for low-income families and yet research has indicated how important good nutrition is to student learning. The principal at Spruce School discussed some of the efforts his school has undertaken to address this need. "We've had the Farm-to-School grant that was really big last year. (It) helped get kids out to the local farms. For some, it may be where their parents were working as workers on the farm. This year we also had a grant for fresh fruit and vegetables and that made a tremendous impact on the kids. Every kid has fresh fruit and vegetables during snack time (in the morning)." The paraeducators at the school noted that because "all kids are provided a healthy, free snack, (there is) no stigma" associated with the program. Students are provided a healthy snack during the after school program, as well. As the school nurse explained, "We try—(through) fresh fruits and vegetables—to meet the nutritional needs of our kids more effectively."

At Maple School, paraprofessionals pointed to students' access to food throughout the day as an important part of the school's overall success. They said, "All year-round, even during the summer, kids get free breakfast, snacks and lunch. (There is a) concerted effort school-wide to make sure kids get access to healthy food. The school nurse even has program that allows the kids to trade in junk food for healthy food." They reported that not all students received the proper nutrition at home and recounted a story of children "who would come in late, drinking coffee, and had not eaten since lunch the day before." Recognizing that this is reality for some students and that nutrition affects students' disposition and ability to focus in class, these schools have done what they can to provide students with healthy food before, during, and after the school day. ▲

chapter seven
School climate

Effective systems create a supportive climate that makes all students, as well as adults, feel valued and safe.

"It's just a positive place. You come into the building and you see people interacting with kids in respectful ways. I feel good about coming to work every day and I think that that resonates throughout the school. A lot of people are proud to be part of this community."

- SPECIAL EDUCATOR, SPRUCE SCHOOL

School climate, a term that refers to the overall feel and tone of the school environment and people's relationships within it, emerged as a critical factor in the success of the three schools studied. Staff recognized that creating safe spaces where students feel valued, accepted, and secure is an important step in making them available to learn. And it is not only the children who benefit. Teachers noted that while the focus is on students' sense of security and well-being, a climate of trust and openness affects them positively and allows for improvement in their instructional practice.

Supportive, tight-knit school community

When staff discussed the overall climate of their school, they spoke of a sense of community, family, and togetherness. Fourth grade teachers at Pine Tree School said, "We're a community of caring. Everybody cares about the kids, not just teachers, not just the paras, everyone—the cooks, the janitor, it's everyone. It's a culture." The superintendent agreed. "Teachers here tend to stay for a long time and that builds a real community, family. There is a real sense of a real community here." The supervisory union/district technology coordinator dismissed the suggestion that the school's culture was the result of its small size saying, "Everyone takes care of everyone here. Size does matter in this case but it's a lot more than that. It's the whole culture of the school and everyone being willing to help each other…and that isn't necessarily dependent on size."

The staff at Spruce School also described a caring community. One creative arts teacher reflected, "I believe it is a very supportive school. Everyone's very supportive of one another so there's this nice culture that we have. We talk about community and at times it feels more like family." A kindergarten teacher agreed. "I think the overall climate of the school is a positive one. (It's) bright, cheery, and welcoming and it provides a good setting for children to feel happy and comfortable…trusting and ready to focus." A fourth grade teacher mentioned some extracurricular activities that enhance the school climate saying, "I think that it's all of the other things that go on at our school throughout the year, whether it's summer school or summer tutoring or the homework club or the school musical. Those after school programs and activities that happen here make this feel more like a home, a community to the students and to the parents." The principal outlined his philosophy behind creating a strong school community. "I think a sense of belonging is certainly is a key piece of what we try to achieve. Building that sense of community is really one part of that."

Safety and security

A safe and supportive school climate is particularly important for students who might not always feel such security outside school. These schools have created safe havens for children that allow them to relax and focus on learning. The principal of Spruce School said, "It's very powerful seeing the smiles on kids as they walk in the door in the morning. This is considered a safe place for them." A third grade teacher concurred saying, "If you were to talk with some of the students who come from really low-income backgrounds, (they would say) this is a really safe nurturing healthy place for them to be and they know it." The principal also mentioned the importance of building personal relationships in order to create the feeling of safety. "You need to connect with the kids and build that trusting relationship. A lot of kids, certainly the ones we see, are highly transitory, in and out. What they need is something they can count on. Some of those kids may not have enjoyed a trusting adult relationship and somebody who believed in them. They need to know that it's not about whether you get the right answer in math or not; it's really about who you are. Once you got them, then the math comes right in. But we really need to make that personal connection (first)."

These schools have created safe havens for children that allow them to relax and focus on learning.

Believing in students and increasing their self-esteem was a priority at Maple School, as well. One of the local school board members commented that, "With the poverty level here, there's also a level of low self-esteem. But when students walk into this building, one of the tasks that is met head on is building self-esteem and I think that's one of the reasons that we are successful. No child (feels) that they are less than they should be and the hope is that they build self-esteem and look forward to bigger and better things in the future." As the assistant principal explained, "You learn that you're safe here and this is the ticket to be what you want to be and go where you want to go." Staff testified to the sense of safety and acceptance students feel on campus. Support staff expressed that, "The school provides stability for kids and a safe haven. It's bright and clean. For some kids, school is their safe place." A first grade teacher offered that, "Those kids need to be loved and wanted. They feel safe (here). Some of our kids say, I don't want to have vacation. I want to be at school."

Staff at Pine Tree School also referenced the importance of safety and security, particularly for their low-income students. As the school's math consultant said, "The school is a very safe and caring environment which is really important when you're talking about low-income kids." One of the ways the school tries to help students feel safe is by ensuring they know all adults by name. A parent of a child at the school explained that, "Kids

know they can go to any of the adults here and they feel safe doing that. When they start pre-school, they're introduced to everyone in the building, even the bus driver."

Clear expectations and consistency of response

Beyond introducing students to all staff members, these schools pursued several other specific strategies to create a healthy, supportive, safe school climate for children. For one, they clearly stated behavioral expectations and responded consistently to infractions. This helped students understand school norms and what was expected of them as learners while in the building. These schools also celebrated good student behavior and sought out opportunities to recognize students who contributed to a positive school environment.

The principal at Spruce School described the efforts he and his staff have undertaken to ensure more consistency across the school in terms of student behavior. He noted that, "in the last few years, our student support center numbers have dropped significantly and that's due to consistency…and the same clear expectations we're trying to get in the classroom in academics and for behavior." A second grade teacher added, "Our whole approach to children and their behavior is uniform. When I first came here, students were rude and physically abusive. That doesn't happen anymore. Students know what's expected of them and the consequences." The literacy team also commented on the school's approach to discipline saying, "We're trying to teach them logical consequences and how to be responsible for the choices they make. That's a lifelong skill that hopefully they will have."

The principal at Pine Tree School also emphasized consistency. She said, "Everybody's very consistent from the playground to the lunchroom to the classroom. Students know what is expected, we're fair, and we follow through. We've established a culture of what you do and what you don't do." A fifth and sixth grade teacher explained the school's rules, "(The school rules are) posted in every room: respect others, respect property, and do your best. (Students) hear that over and over and over and over again." A paraprofessional described how students have responded to the rules saying, "There has been a decline in the planning room, not because they are scared of the principal but because the rules are fair." Staff at the school also emphasized how they respond gently to students who misbehave or fail to follow the rules. As the math consultant said, "You notice when you walk through the halls, you hear very little yelling. They don't yell in Pine Tree. They set the bar and they quietly encourage the kids to reach it." She added, "It's a very safe, calm (environment) You learn when you feel safe and you feel calm…and you know that people care about you and you're held accountable."

Another commonality that emerged across the three schools when it came to discipline and behavior was their acknowledgement of students for doing the right thing. The combination of clear expectations and consistent responses to misbehavior *and* positive reinforcement for good behavior seemed to be quite successful. The principal of Maple School explained his particular approach to celebrating students. "We don't have an honor roll. We have an honored student thing that's basically a set of behaviors that we want kids to have. Teachers quarterly look and see who's doing that consistently and they get recognized as an honored student." The principal of Pine Tree School recounted a story about the school's recent ski trip. She said, "(We) got really nice compliments because (the resort) has new equipment and they said if some other school was coming they might have cancelled. But because it was our school, they weren't worried because our kids always take such good care of the equipment and are so polite." At Spruce Elementary, the guidance counselor described the staff's efforts to "catch kids being good." She explained that, "Even our maintenance person knows the kids by name. The lunchroom staff of course…everybody knows these kids and makes a point of acknowledging them and catching them being good."

Belonging and behavior

All three schools recognized the value of creating a strong sense of community in their classrooms. While at different phases of implementation, two of the three schools mentioned the Responsive Classroom® program as instrumental in helping them establish a safe, nurturing school climate. According to the parent/community coordinator at Spruce School, there has been a "concerted effort to implement Responsive Classroom® across the board" at the school. Teachers lauded the program as helping to create a sense of community in the classroom, particularly through the morning meeting exercise. As a kindergarten teacher explained, "The Responsive Classroom® is helpful. The kids feel like they matter to all their friends. They're not lost in the shuffle. Everyone gets to have their say and be recognized every morning, during the morning meeting." A fifth grade teacher agreed saying, "I think a lot of teachers realize you have to take care of the kid first. They can't learn how to do two digit multiplication if they're thinking about how their dog died or how dad walked out last night. We really have that approach of let's take care of them first. We have the morning meeting time and…we get to check in with them." A member of the literacy team added that she thought morning meeting was particularly important to some children. "For some kids, probably their most positive part of their day was that 25 minutes when we're all together and it was predictable. I think that was very reassuring for them and I think the community building that it brings was huge." At Pine Tree School, where, according to the principal, "most of teachers have been trained in Responsive Classroom®," teachers were also drawn to the morning meeting model. As a second grade teacher said, "It is a great way to start the day. Kids really look forward to

it. It helps build the classroom community at the beginning of the year." A Reading Recovery teacher also noted that she appreciated the program's emphasis on goal setting saying, "That's one of the big things at the beginning of the year. Then they check in (later) on the goals."

Sense of community for adults

Although questions about school climate were primarily focused on students' well being, teachers went to great lengths to describe how the culture of their school was pivotal in their experience and desire to work there. They reported feeling closeness with their colleagues and a strong sense of camaraderie. They worked hard together but also played hard, even spending time with each other outside of school. They also expressed a strong belief in the importance of their students seeing them as happy, engaged professionals. They felt their satisfaction with their job had a positive influence on how the children viewed school. With research indicating that high teacher turnover depresses achievement, building a supportive culture where teachers enjoy coming to work increases the chances that that will stay, which, in turn, can have a positive impact on student outcomes.

The speech language pathologist at Maple School said simply, "This is a good place to be. It's a very supportive school and the culture is nice. We get along. I look forward to coming to work every day." Support staff at the school agreed. One remarked, "I love coming to school every day. I miss everyone when I'm not here. It's like a school family." A fifth grade teacher reported, laughing, "We like our jobs. Can you tell? I think you have to like what you're doing."

The staff at Spruce School also reported a strong sense of cohesion as well as contentment with their work. A sixth grade teacher relatively new to the school commented, "The overall climate and atmosphere of the school is really supportive…both for students as well as for staff and faculty. That's something that I didn't see in a lot of in my pre-service teaching, that staff unity." She went on to say that, "It's a great environment. As a new teacher I felt so welcomed and everyone is so supportive." A member of the literacy team reflected, "It's wonderful to work with a group of people who care as much as we do about children and can work together. (We) genuinely care about each other as well. When we experience something personally, we know our colleagues are there to help us. It's a wonderful place to be." The school nurse agreed saying, "We have a cohesive staff. We know how to communicate. We have parties together; we celebrate the holidays. We have a get-together before school and at the end of school. It's a great place to work. I think it's just that culture. I've been here for 25 years and never had a bad day."

Pine Tree School was also described by its staff as a great place to work. One paraprofessional said, "I think this is the best job I have ever had and I love working here." A fourth grade teacher added, "We're connected as a staff. We're connected to the students. We're connected to the parents and to the community. I think it's our culture. We all care about one another." The principal noted that, "It's the relationships between people that really make a difference…the caring that we show for the kids (and) for each other." A special educator commented, "It's really important that you want to be part of this building. You have to buy into the climate because if you're not 100 percent into the climate of the building, it's not the best place for you to work. I had worked in other buildings and I was looking for a place where I really felt I fit. I've been here for seven years." The principal felt it was a good fit for her, as well, saying, "I haven't regretted it a minute since I came here. Somebody said to me one day, when are you going to retire? I said, why would I retire when I love what I do? If I die at my desk I'll be happy."

The staff at Spruce School were particularly aware of the influence a satisfied and engaged faculty can have on students. A creative arts teacher explained. "The words, the attitude, trickle down. If we're in a better mood and loving what we're doing, the kids are doing well. Math might not be their strong suit but they can see there's enjoyment from the classroom teachers. They're going to be more invested in it. Kids respond to what they see and I think if the teachers are happy and excited to teach, I think the kids will be excited to learn." A fourth grade teacher concurred. "We are modeling for them during the day. When they see us giggling and joking with each other and having serious conversations…they see you as a learner too. So it's good for them to see those models in this safe environment." The principal summed it up by saying, "It's a pretty good place for kids… (and) a pretty good place for adults." ▲

chapter eight
Family engagement

Effective systems build constructive relationships with families and involve them in their child's learning.

"It's our job to engage parents who may or may not be engaged with their kids in terms of learning."

- PRINCIPAL, MAPLE SCHOOL

These schools believed very strongly in the centrality of families in a child's education. They employed specific strategies to engage parents and, as a result, enjoyed very high levels of parent involvement. As the principal of Spruce School reported, "We have between 98 percent and 100 percent of our parents come in for conferences twice a year. Usually there are a couple that (because of) their work schedules haven't been able to come in…but even on those, we'll even go and pick up a parent or have a phone conference with them. We do touch 100 percent. That's a pretty good record." A first grade teacher at the school commented, "I'm truly amazed by the amount of parental support." Teachers at Pine Tree School also felt their level of parental involvement was quite good. One said, "I think we have really great parent involvement here and parents really stay on top of what's going on at school." The Reading Recovery teacher added, "Our parent involvement is pretty high. Having worked in another school in our district, I see a big difference here." The principal of Pine Tree School cited turnouts at parent-teacher conferences similar to Spruce. "We just have really, really supportive parents and community. We just had over 98 percent attendance at parent conferences. Our message to parents is that we want and need them to be involved and that their children will be most successful when they are involved."

So how did these schools accomplish this feat? It seemed, from looking across the three sites, that they pursued three specific strategies. First, they recognized the value of parent engagement in a child's education and expressed full commitment to involving parents. They also tried to make their building a welcoming place for families and reached out with empathy and compassion to all parents, paying particular attention to the needs of low-income families. Finally, teachers communicated regularly with parents and offered them multiple ways to be involved in classroom activities.

Also common to all three sites was the attitude that it was incumbent on the school to involve parents, not the other way around. While many schools might agree that parental support is critical to a child's success in school, what set these schools apart is their commitment to making it happen. Rather than the obligation of parents to seek out the school, these schools saw it as their responsibility to engage parents and entice them into being a part of their child's academic life.

Expressed commitment to parental involvement

The belief that parents are partners in their child's education echoed in the halls of each of these schools. From teachers to paraprofessionals to the principal, staff were dedicated to involving parents in their child's education and communicating that commitment clearly to families. The principal of Maple School said, "Obviously parents who are engaged in their kids' education have a positive effect, particularly in the early years." The principal at Spruce School was also adamant about the role of the parent in a child's education. He said, "One of the pieces that I try to impress for kindergarten parents during registration is they are their child's most powerful advocate. Anything that they have a concern (about), they owe it to their child to be very forthright and follow through. If a kid can't depend on their parent, then who are they going to depend on?" A fifth grade teacher at the school remarked on how teachers view the importance of parents. "You don't find teachers here (who think), ah, thank god, that parent didn't show up…and then never call them. That doesn't happen here. People (think), we've got to get these parents on board because without them, it's a slippery slope and a tough battle." A first grade teacher at Pine Tree School explained what she communicates to parents. She said, "I tell them, I need you. Thank you for letting me borrow you child for the year but I need you and I need your help."

Making school safe and welcoming for families

While these schools strongly asserted that parents needed to be involved in their child's education, they saw it as their job to make families feel safe and welcome in the school. They did not merely impress upon parents the importance of being involved and then leave it up to parents to do so. Instead, they deliberately reached out to families and helped them engage their child's academic life. Perhaps most importantly, these schools were aware of the challenges facing low-income families including lack of time as well as intimidation. They were empathetic towards such situations and worked to make such families feel confident and accepted so they, in turn, could support their children. The supervisory union/district early education coordinator explained that, "Many of the children who demonstrate educational risk factors also have families who demonstrate educational risk factors (and) do not feel comfortable in school. (The parents) did not have a very successful school career so every time they have a child entering kindergarten, they bring those negative memories about schooling with them, and they feel nervous, uncomfortable. Many of them are not confident about their child's ability to be successful in school." A third grade teacher at Spruce School made a similar observation saying, "They're not as comfortable, many of them, unfortunately, coming into the classroom. I've had parents say, I don't have anything to offer, which is really unfortunate so you try to look for (opportunities)." A colleague agreed saying, "At the beginning of the year, I send out a form with suggestions about ways that I could use help. If I don't get help, then the next step is the phone. (I) do some communicating that way. It takes effort to bring those that don't feel comfortable here." A fourth grade teacher at Spruce believes such efforts are beneficial saying, "There's a lot of support from the parents and given our low-income population,

that's not always the case. I think it's a safety that this school has built over the years, that the parents do feel safe and (that) they're doing the best with what they have and we're doing the best with what we have. We all sort of realize that (about) each other and know that through our conversations, we'll help the child grow."

A special educator at Pine Tree School also mentioned the importance of making low-income families feel safe and welcome in a place that might not have always made them feel that way. She said, "You have to get to know the families really well and what their struggles are, especially in light of our current economy. You have to be very promoting of a positive view of education long term." A fourth grade teacher at the school took this approach. "You try to get them in and you start in the beginning with communication. You don't berate them or put them or their children down. You make it a partnership. How you deal with them, how you talk with them—it's building that partnership, the collaboration with them." A Title I teacher at Maple echoed this sentiment saying that one of the reasons for the school's success is the staff's ability to, "develop compassion and understanding of where parents are coming from."

While many schools might agree that parental support is critical to a child's success in school, what set these schools apart is their commitment to making it happen.

These schools' understanding of the barriers to low-income parental involvement and their empathy in addressing those barriers go a long way toward making families feel welcome. As the supervisory union/district early education coordinator for Maple School explained, "When they feel welcome, that their ideas are validated, that they have a role in a child's life… (it) does a lot to help children do well in the school. There are academic things you can do for the children, but there are also many of these emotional behavioral things you can do for kids and their families to help them feel comfortable. That seems to be one of the major contributions (of this school). It's different in other communities that I've been in. I see the experience of low-income families here in a much more positive way than I think they might have in other schools."

Home-school coordinators

In addition to their empathetic approach, two of the three schools took a more concrete step to increasing parental involvement—identifying a point person (in some cases, more than one) to interface and engage parents. These individuals actively reached out to families to involve them and served as liaisons between home and school.

Spruce School employed two point people for parents. One, the parent/community coordinator, communicates with parents about school events and tries to match parent volunteers to opportunities at the school. A parent mentioned the importance of the position saying, "Her position sets the tone that parents are a part of the school community. Parents are a welcome and instrumental part of the classroom and learning. The school actively seeks parents to participate. It's nice to know that I am welcome here." The parent/community coordinator also helps families connect to community-based resources. As she explained, "At my desk, I have a resource list. Any health or dental issue is referred to the school nurse because she has networks and connections that help connect families to free health/dental care. There is a chain. The requests start with me and I send it out to the various people in the school who can support the child and family." A second grade teacher at the school also explained that the parent/community coordinator organizes one of the school's largest parent volunteer programs, the early book center. "The early book center encourages parent involvement and is coordinated by the parent/community coordinator. She arranges for parents to come in and they listen to books that a child has chosen. And then kids choose an additional book." Furthermore, the coordinator assembles and sends home weekly newsletters every Friday, alerting parents to what took place at the school that week and what is coming up. This newsletter keeps parents apprised of school activities and volunteer opportunities. One parent said that, "It is great to have the newsletter."

The school nurse at Spruce also plays an essential role in engaging parents. While the parent/community coordinator reaches out to all families and coordinates school-wide parent volunteer opportunities, the school nurse focuses on families in need. She described her philosophy around parental involvement and some of her experiences working with families. "We need to reach the parents. We need to make our school parent friendly. We need to invite them in; we need to connect with them; we need to engage them. I have felt extremely empowered to move ahead with that and I have a public health background so I do make home visits. I do try to do that outreach because I'm available and it makes sense. Teachers can't be out making home visits at 10:00 in the morning but I think connecting with the parents and finding out what they perceive as the barriers to attendance or getting homework done or why their child isn't able to achieve (is important)." The school nurse also provides transportation to families who could not otherwise attend special events like parent-teacher conferences. As a fifth grade teacher explained, "I have a long list of eye-opening family situations. Our school nurse (will) go to the home because the phone's been disconnected and their license has been suspended…so (she) actually goes to pick up parents and bring them to the conference because there's no

other way they're going to get there. With two of my students, that's standard."

Maple School also made the decision to hire a home-school coordinator to smooth relations between parents and school staff and ensure that parents have the resources they need to be involved in their child's education. The coordinator, who has a mental health background, explained, "Parents often don't know how to participate. It may be (that they need) a simple ride but it is also support in being there, sitting next to the parent at meeting." The home-school coordinator also works to help parents learn how best to support their child academically. She said, "We help look for solutions. Parents may not want to get into power struggle with their child (over homework) so I help (suggest) other times for homework. I also help parents understand how to work with their child on homework. I have had a night for parents where there were discussions about parent-child relationships and issues (nutrition, homework, sleep, etc.)." One of the most important responsibilities of the coordinator is to provide transportation for families who do not have a car or have trouble getting to school for meetings. As the principal explained, "We do have strategies. Home visits are one of those strategies. If we can't contact a parent, and we really need to contact a parent, we either make a home visit or we make arrangement to go get them to bring them here. (We) will provide the transportation to get here or (some parents) come in on the bus with their kids in the morning. If it needs to happen, we'll find a way." The home-school coordinator also helps families connect to outside resources. The principal described this work saying he asks parents, "Can our home-school person help with this? She can hook you up with this agency (or) make this phone call for you. What do you need? So it's that kind of engagement that we have." Teachers reported that the home-school coordinator has been a tremendous help. A kindergarten teacher said, "I find our home-school coordinator really makes a big difference with the low-income children. She gets that communication (going) between home and school and builds a relationship."

Below is a list of the various communication techniques teachers at these schools reported using to stay in touch with parents:

- Hand-written notes
- Email
- Phone calls
- Classroom newsletters
- School newsletters
- School website with teacher pages that include class room-specific information
- Homework sheets or folders for parents to sign
- Report cards or progress reports (often with teacher memos or comments)
- EST meetings
- Form sent home to parents with suggestions for ways to help out in the classroom
- Open-door policy
- Parent/teacher conferences throughout the year
- Meet-the-teacher night
- Open house at beginning of year
- Teachers' attendance at extracurricular activities (children's athletic events, music concerts, etc.) where they can interact with parents

Communication with parents and many opportunities for involvement

It is an expectation in these three schools that all staff will reach out to families and communicate regularly with them about what takes place in the classroom. Teachers used a variety of strategies to share information with parents. At Maple School, the message from the principal to teachers was simple. "Communicate, communicate, communicate…the good stuff and the bad stuff…on a daily or weekly basis." A Reading Recovery teacher at Pine Tree School made a similar comment saying, "The more communication you have about students with parents the better things are for kids."

Beyond the constant communication between the classroom and home, these schools offered parents a wide variety of opportunities to become involved in school activities or attend a school event. They have recognized that attracting parents to the school, regardless of the particular function, is a step towards bringing them into the community and making them feel comfortable in the school environment. The great variety of options for parental involvement also reflects the schools' understanding that not all parents will choose to be involved in the same way. For example, at Spruce School, the annual musical production is staffed entirely by parent volunteers. Parents also volunteer at the early book center and read to students. Third grade teachers at the school reported that some parents come into the classroom to help students with their spelling skills. As one of the teachers explained, it is very helpful for children to see their parent in an educational role. "You can just almost see this little boy whose mom is doing spelling this year…she's not a typical (volunteer) in the school and it does her son a great deal of good to see mom in here weekly, testing his friends, pre-testing them on spelling words. You always try to make sure that every child has some reason to think my mom and my dad sees my year in third grade as important." To honor all the work of parent volunteers, the school holds an end-of-the-year picnic. The principal described the event saying, "It's a nice end of the year

kind of closure piece. Teachers all cook hotdogs and the families bring everything else. We kind of scatter around the field and put blankets down. We have presentations and performances from the kids and it's a nice last week of school kind of a wrap up." Teachers at Spruce also offer parents classes or tutorials on the curriculum they teach in their classroom. As a fifth grade teacher said, "We switched the math (program) and it's a really different way of thinking than a lot of parents learned in school. We had classes where they could come attend." The school also has a holiday program, spring concerts, and a science fair in the spring to which parents are invited.

Pine Tree School also tries to provide multiple ways for parents to be engaged in school activities including such activities as Kindergarten Orientation, Back-to-School Night, Family Dinner Night, concerts, volunteering, special classroom events, coming in to have lunch with their children, etc. A special educator at the school said, "You have to give the parents opportunities to come in and observe what's going on here. (We) invite them to child presentations, speech contests, spelling competitions, reader's theater, anything cute that the kids have accomplished and they really want to show their parents." Parents volunteer in the fifth and sixth grade classrooms, conferencing with students or helping to judge speech competitions. The school also puts on an annual senior dinner for senior citizens in the community that attracts many grandparents. All classes, even the pre-school, participate in the event, making decorations or serving food.

There is a Four Winds parent volunteer program at Maple School that teachers cite as a great avenue for involving families. The school also invites parents to join their child in the cafeteria for lunch when they're available. As the principal said, "Parents come in and have lunch with their kids all the time. And that's great." The school hosts a community breakfast annually to which parents are encouraged to attend. According to support staff at the school, "Well over 300 families participated last year. There was no cost for families because it was funded by a grant. Sometimes the principal cooks or the (local school) board cooks." The school ensures that parents are invited to any assembly recognizing their child. When students are honored for good behavior, the parents are always in the audience. As the assistant principal said, "You always bring positive recognition to the parents and you always thank the parents. You draw out into the public how important it is and (that) what they're doing obviously is working for their child. I think the parents really get something out of it too." The assistant principal also discussed the effort the school makes to reach out to the families of incoming kindergarteners. "We have parents coming on our little yellow bus tour. We go pick up all the preschoolers and drive around town and the parents come here and parade through the building. The parents just love that. You know how important that first day of kindergarten is, and they get to do this with their youngster in advance." The guidance counselor also talked about the school's family fun nights. "We try three times a year to do a family fun night. Our theme is literacy. We eat supper together, share a story, talk about the story, and then do a physical activity. We then break out into groups and different teachers try to help parents understand what it is their children are learning so that it can help them at home. We are now starting that with math. The things that we are doing now with parents (means they are) more like partners." ▲

District and local school board support

The three schools studied do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they benefited from a context of informed support that included their local school board members, supervisory union/district staff, and members of the broader community. Schools mentioned the various ways the district administration and school board assisted them in their efforts to improve student outcomes and also credited their local community for their ongoing support. While much of the success these schools have experienced can be attributed to the vision, hard work, and dedication of those inside the school building, the role of external partners cannot be overlooked. In the absence of such support, school reform is often more difficult and time consuming to achieve.

SUPERVISORY UNION/ DISTRICT SUPPORTS

When it came to supervisory union/district administration, schools named three distinct types of support they received: curriculum alignment and assessment planning; professional development; and teacher evaluation models.

Alignment of curriculum and assessment

The supervisory union/district office of all three schools shared a strong commitment to aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment with the state standards (Grade Expectations or GEs) as well as across schools. Districts saw it as their responsibility to ensure that each of their schools provided students with instruction aligned to the GEs and had the tools (e.g. curricular programs, assessments) to do the job well.

The supervisory union/district office at Spruce School had several initiatives underway related to curriculum alignment and assessment development. The first was the creation of a K-3 and 4-8 literacy binder. A sixth grade teacher explained the project. "(The binders) will provide cohesion in reading and writing. This is the first district where I've ever worked in where all elementary schools and the high school have the same writing guidelines, the same requirements for the year." A kindergarten teacher added, "There's a lot of consistency across the district. It's good. (The literacy binder represents) the expectations of what (students) will be exposed to." The principal added that the two literacy binders were developed collaboratively by a team of representatives from the district's schools. The supervisory union/district also chose a common math curriculum for all schools so that students in the feeder elementary and middle schools would have the same preparation going into the district's single high school. The district also worked to help teachers score students' writing responses consistently across schools. As a sixth grade teacher explained, "Our district formed a writing forum (that includes) two teachers from every school. So you're reading other teachers' work and scoring it. (We are) developing our own set of benchmarks. Each teacher had to submit three separate prompts and the writing forum responded to our prompts (and gave us) feedback from teachers which was really helpful." The district is kicking off a similar reading forum this year.

The supervisory union/district office of Pine Tree School is also working to bring more consistency to the curriculum offered in its schools. The superintendent said, "I want to have a coordinated curriculum in the major curriculum areas so that kids are going to (the district high school on the same page). We need to be concerned about how all the kids are doing and as coordinated as we can be." The district curriculum coordinator echoed his sentiments saying, "There was a time when there wasn't a lot of structured curriculum work going on. (Each school) kind of did their own thing. We all need to be on the same page. I believe that starts with curriculum development and we're all in that together."

It was a similar story from the district office of Maple School. Alignment and consistency of curriculum across schools were stated goals. As the superintendent explained, "Math is a real challenge for some reason and we just adopted a math program. There was not consistency across the district as to what program they were going with. I've asked staff to be working on that so that there's a systematic approach to the curriculum, professional development, and budgeting." In addition to a common curriculum, teachers at Maple School reported developing common standards-based report cards district-wide as well as implementing common district assessments. A kindergarten teacher explained. "We use two assessments and they're district-wide. The kindergarten teachers regularly meet throughout the district. We have a report card that is (standards-based). We all spent a week in the summer developing this report card and our assessment and it was from the GEs." A first grade teacher reported that the district's standards-based report card has been very helpful. "For me, that's really helped me…align our math program and our

writing needs and our reading needs to the GE's. We're making sure we're hitting all the GE's I feel like a lot better than before the report card came out."

Professional development

Another way supervisory union/district offices supported schools was through the provision of professional development. For Spruce School, the professional development staff cited as most helpful came in the form of instructional coaches who observed teachers in their classroom, offered feedback, and modeled lessons. Maple School also benefits from district curriculum and instructional coaches. The early education coordinator explained that, "We have a social studies coach, math coach, a literacy coach, and we're talking about a science coach who I think the teachers will tell you are indispensable to helping them. They can often do the legwork like curriculum searches. They can help with materials. They can come in and do an observation and help that teacher improve."

Pine Tree School reported satisfaction with district-wide in-services offered by grade level. As a member of the local school board explained, "It benefits our teachers because there's only one teacher for every grade and so they can't go to the other second grade teacher and say, what are you doing? But now doing it district-wide, our teachers get that which probably has been a great benefit for them." As for the content of those in-service days, the district curriculum coordinator explained that they choose a focus area for the year. For 2009-10, the focus is on writing.

Maple School's supervisory union/district also recently shifted to in-service days organized by grade level. The district curriculum coordinator described the change. "Before, they used to do it by schools, but this time they did (a) professional development survey. The teachers let me know that they would like to do it by grade level and work with other teachers in the district at their own grade levels. We asked them what they needed and we also looked at their data. Throughout all the surveys, they talked about behavior holding the students back from learning, so we actually had two behavior courses here." The superintendent felt it was important that the district's professional development plan be informed by teacher input saying, "I think the professional development plan has far reaching impact. It was based on teacher input and that is so important. (It) should not be top-down; it's got to be bottom up so that the teachers buy in to where we put our resources. We spent about $100,000 on professional development and when you spend that kind of money, you have to make sure it's going to where it needs to go and (that) we're reaping the benefits in the classroom."

This is the first district where I've ever worked in where all elementary schools and the high school have the same writing guidelines, the same requirements for the year.

TEACHER, SPRUCE SCHOOL

Teacher evaluation

Two of the three schools, Spruce and Maple, recently implemented new teacher evaluation systems as part of a supervisory union/district initiative. The superintendent of the Maple School district was pleased with his district's new approach although he acknowledged that it is a work in progress. He said, "We worked last year to develop a comprehensive teacher assessment program based on Charlotte Danielson model. It's not where I'd like it to be at this point. We still have a lot of work to do there, but it's a beginning. (And) it's put the focus on the importance of what goes on in the classroom; that message was strong and we're going to be able to capitalize on that program as we go forward." The superintendent felt strongly about the importance of focusing on teacher quality. He went on to say that, "I've shared this with all the principals… when you hire a new teacher, you marry them and it's up to you to make sure they are a success." He acknowledged that new teacher evaluation systems can be contentious saying, "You have to be careful how you present it…the whole idea is (to) begin the discussion. If this instrument starts discussions in faculty rooms about how to help Johnny or Sally to read and the teachers start collaborating on helping a child improve, then it's a success. That's what we want the discussion to be. We put our focus and our efforts on helping students learn." The new teacher model in place in the Spruce School district includes a myriad of indicators related to teacher effectiveness.

SUPPORTIVE LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS

These schools also benefited from supportive local school boards. Staff mentioned characteristics of their boards that they felt were critical to a successful working relationship. One, boards were described as child-centered and genuinely interested in the well being and success of students. Two, they trusted the professional experience of the administration and staff to do what was best for students and avoided micro-managing. And three, boards did not advocate for a particular agenda.

The principal of Pine Tree School remarked, "I've had my share of different

boards and the board here has been great. They're just really supportive and they're all about kids." A district staff member added, "The board here is an integral part of the community. They love the school." The district curriculum coordinator at Maple School described the local school board there saying, "They have a very excellent school board that really, really cares about the achievement of all kids. (They are) very interested in test results and they want them to go up. I think a student centered school board is (important)."A board member in Maple described his approach to his duties. "This is a case study of how the relationship between the administration and the board has influence on what happens in the classroom…by putting children first. It's certainly what happens here." The assistant principal agreed saying, "They like children which is helpful. I've heard our board often say, we need to make decisions in the interest of students. (So) they're talking about the needs of the students certainly, but they're balancing it with their taxpayers." At Spruce School, the school nurse spoke of the board's interest in truly understanding the needs of students and about an invitation the board extended to the staff several years ago. "Six years ago, our school board invited us to meet with them to have pizza and (talk) informally. What they wanted to know is, how are we going to reach the struggling learner? It was so refreshing to have the school board sit down with us and pose this question."

Another foundational element to a positive working relationship between a board and its administration is trust. The supervisory union/district curriculum coordinator for Pine Tree School commented on the principal's relationship with the board saying, "There's a relationship between her and her board, one of mutual respect and trust. Her board listens to her. If she goes to (them) and says this is something we really need to move us forward, they listen because they've got that relationship and trust. But she also doesn't go and ask for the world." A teacher at the school added that the positive relations with the board "help(s) morale. The school board being supportive makes us feel like we're valued and that's important." The assistant principal of Maple School described a similar dynamic with the board of her school. "They trust you. That's the working relationship." The principal added, "They don't micromanage us, and that's a rule of the board. (Their philosophy is) you keep us informed, you show us the results, you tell us how it's going, and if we have questions, we're going to ask and you better answer them. But we're not going to be in there everyday looking over your shoulder. That's just not the mindset that they have." In fact, the district's curriculum coordinator cited this positive relationship between board and administration as one of the primary reasons for the school's success. He said, "You can get so much more done if everybody's on the same page. You have a non-adversarial school board and an administrative team who feel supported. You make significant progress if school boards support their administrators and let them do what they need to do."

Finally, it was mentioned that the boards of these schools did not have a specific agenda allowing for the needs of the school to drive their work. The supervisory union/district technology coordinator for Pine Tree School noted, "I don't see any of those groups trying to take advantage or push. It's safe and respectful. That's why it works well." A board member for Maple School commented that, "At times someone, is interested in a board position because they need to be heard. They have an agenda. That hasn't been the case here." Perhaps one of the reasons is that the administration goes in search of board members they believe will be a good fit for the school community. The principal said, "Let me say upfront, we actively recruit school board members. What we look for is someone who is going to put in the time, and someone who doesn't have an agenda because that's what kills boards. No upfront agenda. We are looking for… people who can keep the best interest of the school (in mind)." ▲

The board here is an integral part of the community. They love the school.

DISTRICT STAFF MEMBER,
PINE TREE SCHOOL

Relationship with the larger community

The communities in which these schools are situated also contributed to their success, according to staff. These schools and their towns were highly interconnected and enjoyed an almost symbiotic relationship. The school actively reached out to the community to form relationships and served as a hub for community activities. In turn, the town was supportive of the school and passed budgets repeatedly. In addition, community resources such as the health services, food shelves, and mental health facilities were very important to some families, particularly those living below the poverty line.

School as resource for the community

Staff discussed their efforts to reach out to the community and engage them in school events. They also mentioned the community's use of the school building for various purposes. In these ways, the school in these towns was seen as a resource and a center of activity. It served more than just school-age children; it served the community as a whole.

Pine Tree, a farming community, is in a remote, rural part of the state. For that reason, the school takes on a great deal of importance to the community. As a supervisory union/district administrator explained, "Pine Tree is a very small town and there isn't a lot of employment here, probably with the exception of this school. The school tends to be a centerpiece. There is really a lot of focus around the school because there isn't a big factory and a lot of people work some place else. There aren't as many farms as there used to be." One of the highlights of the year for the citizens of Pine Tree is the senior dinner. Put on by the school, all senior citizens in the community are invited to the gymnasium for an evening of food and entertainment. Each year the dinner has a special theme. A district administrator described her experience at the event. "This place was incredible. It was full (of people). They did a Disney theme (with) artwork. Every kid was involved somehow. That's just a part of the culture. The sixth graders are the hosts so those kids grow up knowing that they're coming to that." The senior dinner is not the only way the school reaches out to the community. A teacher explained that, "when someone turned 100 at the elderly facility, the whole school went down and sang happy birthday." The school also helps families in need in the area. A fourth grade teacher said, "We raise money to help families. We've had somebody who was burned out and we raised money for that. We've (helped) the homeless. We've (helped) the humane society. We go and sing to the seniors. We just try to connect all the time in the community." The school also works to help organize other community groups to assist families. A teacher explained. "The churches are very involved with the community. They'll call the school and ask what family do you feel is needy and would need some clothing or would need some food? And the principal will come around to us and say who needs food? Who needs a jacket?" One teacher described the school as "the little hub of the town" saying, "The school's very involved with the town and vice versa."

A special educator at Spruce School reported actually looking for a job at the school because of its strong connection to the community. "One of the reasons I watched the computer every day looking for an opening at Spruce is because it's so respected in the community. It builds a connection with the community. They reach out and I think that's incredible to build those relationships with families and have them see school as an important piece of their lives. That's something that I was really drawn to because I value that myself." A parent described the various ways the school is connected to its community saying, "Local authors/illustrators come in, there are community activities in gym, there are scrap booking meetings held here that are open to the community. Staff reaches out and tries to bring in community members to the school." In addition, the principal explained that, "The Boys and Girls Club uses the library (and) the YMCA uses the cafeteria." The school also offers its large indoor gymnasium to community members who want to play basketball or other sports.

The local board chair of Maple School also mentioned the various ways his school opens itself to the community as a resource. "This building is a resource to the community that's used quite well from all types of activities, whether music (or) sports. The building is used and not abused. Very seldom do we have any destruction or damage and that's attributed to the respect that I think the people have for the school." The support staff mentioned events held at the school like "internet-safety classes, library club, family night with pizza, Veterans Day celebrations." One member of the support staff said there has been a "stronger trend of the community coming to use the building." An example of an event held at the school is the annual community breakfast. Over 300 families participated last year. A fifth grade teacher described a similar undertaking, a community barbeque saying, "At the end of the year we do the barbeque where all

the community is invited. It's done in the cafeteria. Anybody can come. The teachers go, the administration goes, the school board. There are cars everywhere. The community plays a huge part in it. It's just another way for us to connect the community to our school." The assistant principal explained the idea behind such affairs. "We're always trying to get the public in here. There is a sense of connectedness here with officials, parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, business area businessmen. We're all interconnected here up in this little pocket, this little town." Also, similar to Pine Tree School, the school serves as a liaison or distributor for other organizations trying to reach families. The assistant principal said, "We're lucky that there are agencies and groups who donate stuff to us yearly at Thanksgiving and Christmas…clothing, food. We act as a distributor."

Community support for the school

Perhaps as a result of such efforts, all three schools reported a great deal of support, philosophically and financially, from their towns. As a sixth grade teacher at Spruce School said simply, "The town likes this school. They always approve the budget." In fact, the principal reported that in his many years at the school, "The community has never voted down the budget. The community has been very supportive." The story was much the same at Pine Tree School. A special educator reported that, "Pretty much every year I've been here, the budget has passed unanimously or close to it." Another teacher said, "I think (the town) really values education. And they take pride in this school." Beyond passing the budget, Pine Tree staff talked about the other ways the town supports the school. A teacher commented that, "The community here is just very tight. They've always been very helpful. To give you an example, when we had the ice storm a few years ago, someone in the community got a generator and they put it in the school so if we're out of electricity, we (can) still come to school." The principal agreed saying, "They're here if we need them. We had a huge wind storm one year which caused a lot of trees to come down and damage to our fencing. There were people (who) immediately came and help us clean up and it was just really incredible. The community (is) involved, proud of the school, and puts education first."

We've got a community that trusts us and supports the stuff that we want to do.

PRINCIPAL, MAPLE SCHOOL

This sentiment was echoed at Maple School where, according to the district early education coordinator, "the budget hasn't failed to pass once" in ten years. The principal said, "I've got a community that I don't fight with. This community is extremely supportive of this place and it's unique. We've got a community that trusts us and supports the stuff that we want to do." A local board member also pointed out that the business community has been very supportive of the school. "If you go into some of the classrooms, you might have noticed teaching aids that were purchased by a business or by a group of people. We find on the playground, on occasion, there's support there from the community to purchase a piece of equipment."

Community-based resources

Outside of passing budgets and lending a hand in weather emergencies, the communities surrounding these three schools also play an important role in supporting needy families. Although the schools themselves do much to support children and their parents, many have needs that the schools alone cannot address. Maple School, the largest of the three, is located in a densely populated area of the state and, for that reason, families have good access to social services. This is less true for Spruce School although some services are available locally. Pine Tree School, located in a very rural area, has the fewest services available to families.

There are numerous resources available to the families of Maple School because many social service agencies are based in the downtown area. According to the district's early education coordinator, low-income families actually gravitate to the city because resources are so readily accessible. "(This area) probably has more services than other places. (Families) move here so they can live without a car, for example. They can walk for mental health services. The Head Start program serves primarily walkers from the low-income housing apartment community within two blocks. People congregate here because of the services." A list of the services and resources available includes: affordable/subsidized housing, health and dental care, a parent/child center, Head Start, multiple food shelves, human services agencies, mental health services, homeless shelters, community action offices, and various church groups. The principal of Maple School feels that these resources greatly benefit his low-income students and their families. He said, "Being where the state offices are and those agencies are located helps us immensely…just because of proximity. The further away you get from that center, the harder it is to access the services. So just location, location, location helps us a lot." ▲

What helps me learn?*

PERSON

• My teacher • My friends • My mom
• Supportive family • My principal • My grandparents
• Someone who helps me if I am stuck
• Teachers that give easy to understand directions
• My teacher and my mom inspire me to do my best.
• My teachers make things really clear to me and explain things really well.

PLACE

• School • Classroom • Computer room • Home
• Any place you can study • Library
• After school program
• School… because all the teachers accept me and tell me that I do fine.
• The barn • Music class • Art class
• Gym class • Lunch

ACTIVITY

• After school program • Independent work
• Partner work • Whole class work • Reading Recovery
• Experiments • Discussion • Writing responses
• Drawings • Models • Games • Songs
• Hands-on work • Recess • Morning meeting
• Hunter safety course

THING

• Textbooks • Ruler
• A pencil helps me write and learn • Books
• Computers help me learn by giving me specific knowledge the teacher might not have.
• Music • Homework • Blackboard • Calculators
• Discovery channel • Spelling packets • Portfolios
• No one laughs at you if you make a mistake.

*Responses from Maple School 2nd and 5th graders, Spruce School 3rd and 6th graders, and Pine Tree School 4th and 6th graders

CONCLUSION

So what does this all mean? First, this research has shown that given the right learning environment, outcomes can be improved for all students. We must no longer accept that some children, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, cannot succeed in school. With conviction and passion, the schools and staff profiled in this report demonstrated that when this assumption is abandoned, unexpected results do occur.

Secondly, we now know much more about the type of learning environment students need to be successful. A statewide survey of Vermont teachers identified a specific package of school characteristics that produce positive student outcomes. In-depth site visits to three inspiring schools that are beating the odds corroborated findings from the teacher survey and provided rich detail about what this package of school characteristics looks like on the ground—what it sounds and feels like when implemented well. They prove that schools can make a significant difference in children's social and academic lives.

We must no longer accept that some children, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, cannot succeed in school.

Finally, both the teacher survey and site visits illustrate that it is not a single program or strategy that ensures student success. Rather, effective schools create a comprehensive education system to best meet the needs of all students. This system is built on the steadfast belief that every single student can succeed if given the right supports and opportunities. It is guided by strong, focused leadership committed to continuous school improvement and follows best practices related to the use of data, instruction, student supports, climate, and family involvement. It is this interwoven, interrelated web of attitudes, values, strategies, and approaches that yield strong student achievement. A new reading curriculum or intervention program will fail to produce results when pursued in isolation. In other words, there is no silver bullet solution. Helping all students achieve at high levels, especially those who struggle, requires hard work and dedication on multiple fronts and a systems orientation to the work.

Our charge now is to implement successful systems, like the ones profiled in this report, in each of our schools. If we do so, we have the potential to close long-standing, stubborn achievement gaps and improve outcomes for all Vermont students. However, we must not dismiss how challenging this task will be. The staff in the schools we visited continue to work on strengthening themselves and their system in support of each student they encounter on any day in any year. As the principal of Maple School said, "The research (about how to reach this population of students) has been there. It's been around for a long time. We've got the information. What we need is the will."

VERMONT

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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