Jordan Small Middle School – School-level Report

Study of Improving Maine Schools

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

The CEPARE research team is pleased that Jordan Small Middle School (JSMS), an improving Maine middle school, agreed to be part of this important study. The school is part of the RSU 14 and serves approximately 200 students in grades 5-8 from a southern Maine lakeside community. Approximately 32% of the student population is eligible for free and/or price-reduced lunch, 18% is identified as special education, and 0% of students have been identified as English Language Learners.

CEPARE researchers Erika Stump and Cathie Fallona visited Jordan Small Middle School in Raymond, Maine on January 23-24, 2013 after speaking with the principal at an earlier date to prepare the schedule and gather additional information regarding the practices and characteristics of JSMS. In all, the team conducted meetings with teachers, staff, students, and school and district administrators in both interview and focus group settings. Observations were conducted during classroom and non-classroom time. Student and staff handbooks, school and district curriculum documents, newsletters, student work, and school websites were reviewed to help paint a picture of the school as a whole. Researchers obtained additional information from the Maine Department of Education website and from a review of articles in local and regional newspapers over the past three years.

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

and community a *snapshot* of some of the evidence this school demonstrated in the five areas. At the conclusion of the study, the research team will provide all schools with a cross-site analysis.

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

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

1. **Understanding:** focused, sustained and thorough academic (content knowledge and fundamental skills) and social/behavioral (interpersonal relationships, social trends, cultural norms, etc.) learning.

2. **Transformation**: constant inquiry using various reasoning processes and all levels of cognitive thinking to work with information and concepts in order to create innovative solutions.

3. **Sharing**: clear communication of invigorating conclusions that enhance existing ideas.

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

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

- *JSMS demonstrated a collective culture of high expectations.* Teacher, "You don't know [students] can do it unless you push hard and try. We are always asking, 'Are they capable of doing better?'" This belief was evident in the focused engagement of students and staff during learning time. Our classroom observations (n= 42) indicated that students were most often engaged with the learning task at hand: 16 observations reflected "all" students engaged; 14 observations reflected "all but a few" students engaged; 9 observations reflected "a majority" of students engaged; and only 3 observations reflected "less than half" of students engaged. This work ethic was reported to be continued at students' homes, and one parent said, "I like that they have homework." The high level of academic expectation for all students was also demonstrated in the fact that it was indicated that approximately 60 out of 100 students in 7th and 8th grade were enrolled in Algebra or Geometry math courses (commonly high school level math). A teacher said, "A lot of kids come in and think they can't do math, and you have to show them that they can." There were also engaging, higher order thinking math

reasoning opportunities integrated with the 5th and 6th grade math curriculum including the students' involvement in The Stock Market Game and Robotics projects.

- *While traditional academic outcomes such as standardized test results and curriculum standards reflected a strong student achievement level, educators and students also focused on the learning process and engaging in higher order thinking.* Teacher, "We talk to kids about what they learn: 'What is the purpose? Prove to me that you know this...Okay you know what that is? Show me.'" Another teacher said, "Students here are not afraid to ask for help. They're always going to learn from that." Students and teachers were aware of the various stages and methods of content area and cognitive learning. Teachers indicated that all students and educators spent the first two weeks of school engaging in lessons about cognitive taxonomies and learning styles. 50% of our classroom observations (n=42) reflected that the primary goal of the learning activity was "understanding;" 7% of classroom observations reflected that the primary goal of the learning activity was "transformation;" and 38% of observations reflected that the goal of the learning activity was an equal mix of both understanding and transformation. {Note: According to the Center for Authentic Intellectual Work's *Teaching for Authentic Intellectual Work: Standards and Scoring Criteria for Teachers' Tasks, Student Performance and Instruction* (Newmann, King and Carmichael, 2009), the goal for a high quality learning experience is to engage all students in activities which have higher order thinking (i.e. "transformation") as their primary tasks 60% - 100% of their learning time and lower order thinking (i.e. "understanding") 0% - 40% of their learning time.} Students spoke of and shared work that reflected a thorough understanding of the process of work such as writing, mathematical reasoning and reading. A student said, "We don't just jump into a project. We study how to do it, and we do rough drafts."

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

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

- *Educators at JSMS modeled the learning process in their classrooms and as professionals.* Teachers and Education Technicians were encouraged to engage in professional learning experiences that "align with district focus." This work would often directly impact student learning and curriculum, such as content area coursework. A teacher said, "We model learning. There is transparent teacher learning. We talk about our courses and learning experiences with students." A teacher said, "The professional time is provided at the school and district level." Technology leaders indicated that teachers and professional staff are "on an equal playing field" in terms of technology training. Although in recent years most technology professional development was given to individual educators upon request, teachers had numerous technology options because "if all teacher have to use the same technology methods, it stifles

individuality." All teachers had a laptop and LCD projector and "are willing to build on a tradition of strong technology in this school."

- *There was evidence of a constant effort to analyze and evaluate curriculum, learning standards, and student achievement.* A school leader indicated, "Our work is thoughtful, especially when looking at student data." A district leader said there was an intellectual curiosity that led them to "dissect data" regularly. There were writing sessions with all grade level teachers at staff meetings to analyze student writing samples, professional time dedicated to defining Core Values of school culture, opportunities to conduct observations and visits in other schools as well as colleagues' classrooms, and significant work aligning curriculum with Common Core Standards. This work appeared to include a deliberate effort at common, collective work. Teachers said, "The kids see the teachers collaborating and see the collegiality" because "other teachers have their doors open, and you can go to them." School board members said, "There has been an explosion of excitement around sharing." A teacher said, "We are in sync. There is a common language." This culture also appeared to encourage professional innovation. A district leader said, "It is okay to take a risk and be entrepreneurs." A school board member indicated, "We are growth based. Teachers are not penalized for being innovative."

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

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

- *A culture of high expectations also incorporated the knowledge of individual learners and their needs.* A school leader said, "No child is falling through the cracks. Our work is very conscious." A parent echoed this sentiment: "It's difficult for kids to get lost in the shuffle." Other staff members said, "Most adults in this school feel like every one of these children are our responsibility;" and "the school has a small town feel; it's a community." This was translated into engaging students in academic work as well. A teacher said, "I think we're pretty good at reading our audience and adjusting and adapting accordingly." Several staff members indicated that looping with students for two years "allows us the time we need to focus and individualize." A teacher said, "One thing that makes our school strong is the ability to know all kids."

- *This knowledge of individual learners translated into academic support and interventions for students of all ability levels and learning styles.* School staff proudly described the work of educators and students in the school's various programs for students with special needs. Teachers were "very diagnostic" with student assessment data: using multiple checkpoints, the lowest 40th percentile of students identified by NWEA, NECAP and AimsWeb achievement scores

received two additional math and/or reading classes per week. A school board member indicated, "The bar has been raised; there is greater equity." A parent noted that the vertical communication between grades allowed teachers to identify student needs to each other and parents. These intervention periods were clearly discussed with students as well. A teacher said, "Students want to work to get out of Intervention period. They know they can and are comfortable taking risks." While this time did reduce identified students' Allied Arts class time, the arts were a strongly supported and emphasized part of every student's learning experience at JSMS. "Our community is not going to let [the arts] go. You can't just take away music; it's a building block." Various educators and students referred to the art and music classes, arts clubs and school performances as a strength of the school. Our observations included numerous high quality visual art displays of student work throughout the building.

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

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

- *JSMS developed and used various common practices that created more efficient use of instructional time.* Content area curriculum was aligned to common standards to emphasize essential skills and content knowledge using the Maine Learning Results, Common Core Standards and relevant national standards. In addition, a common language for discussing a collaboratively developed vision, upholding expectations of school culture, and modeling high expectations for learning was evident among personnel in various roles as well as students, parents and school board members. A school board member said, "We have very efficient teachers." Also, a veteran staff with at least ten years in the district built a common professional knowledge base and shared philosophy. A teacher said, "There is a clear vision of what is expected to be taught." These characteristics combined to create a prevalent, consistent school culture of learning that could work smoothly and focus on student learning. This appeared to be true for various professional roles since the elementary and middle school share some education specialists and support staff. One staff member said, "Shared staff and staff mobility requires more awareness and understanding of all grade levels."

- *Purposeful management of time and resources contributed to an overall efficiency and effectiveness.* As mentioned above, common language, vision and standards allowed teachers to focus their professional opportunities on specific student issues or building on a strong foundation of content knowledge. Teaching staff indicated that smaller enrollment levels provided teachers and staff with the chance to try new ideas and evaluate implementation with anecdotal observations and individual interaction. An RTI system of in-school math and literacy labs

was phased in beginning in 2008. An after-school intervention time was also developed for an identified population of students, providing staffing and student transportation from grant funding that began in 2009. A district leader said, "community is getting a good value for taxpayer dollars." Professional practices were also described as being efficient: "Our upper leadership team models learning. Our meetings are not about nuts and bolts or managerial; they are about professional learning." District leadership indicated that a model of "cascade accountability" built efficiency with precise, transparent evaluation of programs and personnel. Numerous staff comments also commended the focus of leadership: "[The principal] is focused, consistent and always thinking." District leaders also indicated, "School leadership is accountable to the work."

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

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

- *In 2006, the current principal (formerly a teacher in the district) was hired and began clear, collective work towards improving student learning.* One teacher said, "Willingness to change is really about leadership and having that direction, giving us parameters. A constant lack of focus causes teachers to retreat to their classrooms." It was indicated that the "principal is a major part of the changes that have happened in this school." Another staff member said, "Previously there was a level of tension with management style. Now it truly feels like *we*." Teachers agreed that there was a "spirit of cooperation." A teacher said, "There is a willingness in the veteran staff to change if it is in the best interest of kids." This collective effort for improvement included school staff, district staff as well as community, parents and students. A school board member said, "Professionalism of teachers is critical. There is dialogue here: 'What can we do?' It is cooperative." A district leader said, "Our method is to plan, tweak, evaluate and get feedback." Small committees involve parents in school change work. A school board member said, "The more we talk to folks in the town, the better. As things start to change, if we don't have the backbone of explanation, people are less likely to be on board."

- *Approximately eight years ago, district leadership established a focus on the strategic plan of "Success for All."* A district leader said, "We have a transparent strategic direction that we articulate often." Leadership and staff alike said that professional learning and collaboration was significant in developing and implementing this strategic plan, so most professional development aligned with the goals of the plan and provided time for teaching staff to work together. School board members commended the recent change to be more data oriented, "People now embrace data." In our conversations, teachers and school leaders were very

aware of individual student data as well as school-level data. All stakeholders also shared an understanding that improvement was an on-going effort and it was important in that journey to be "more public with our successes." A teacher indicated, "We make a big deal of improving test scores. We talk about it a lot and tell the kids we're working on it." School staff mentioned that there was more celebration of student learning with student work being displayed throughout the school and recognition when there was achievement of the "higher academic expectations of students."

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

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

- *As mentioned in other sections of this report as well, the current principal guided focused, collaborative leadership in the school.* As a former music teacher in the school prior to being hired as an administrator, it was evident the principal had respect and trust from his staff. "He doesn't lose the teacher point of view; he has the whole perspective." "The principal has a tremendous amount of support from faculty to make him successful." "He came from the ranks." "He's a good pilot." The principal himself indicated that the collaboration and effort of the staff was a critically key aspect in the school's improvement. However, it was evident that while "he looks out for staff, but kids are the priority." A school board member said, "The principal is respected and challenging...He treats teachers like professionals but doesn't let people get away with stuff. He's pretty no nonsense." Various staff members, parents and students agreed that there were higher academic expectations, clearly upheld by school leadership. With the principal's guidance, the school also empowered various staff members to serve in leadership roles. A school leadership team, which included teaching staff, met regularly; teachers served as curriculum designers, technology integrators and literacy coaches; there was a Building Council, for which teachers could apply for membership, advised the principal and kept stakeholders informed of school initiatives and information. One teacher said, the principal is a "really good listener...considers each point of view. His final decision is respected because he weighed everything."

- *The current district administration highlighted focused accountability and collective work with a shared vision.* The district's strategic plan of "Success for All" appeared to guide much of the focused work directed from the district level. Leadership said they "keep it alive with a blueprint" for implementation and evaluation. "Always keeping that on the forefront" allowed the work of leaders and practitioners to remain focused, efficient and effective. Four task groups, each working on an identified area needing improvement, engaged in literature review, data analysis and recommendations by teachers and school board members in the groups. "We are

not doing this work in silos; we make interconnections between task groups." Leaders indicated, "we are engaging them with a purpose" by looking at "revolutionary learning" examples, data from across the country, samples of best practice and then "empower teachers" to implement. It was reported that school representatives (teachers and administrators) shared with the district leadership and school board how they were implementing the strategic plan. Each stakeholder appeared to understand his/her role in school improvement, which district leadership says "allows us to continue on our path; we know we are focused on the strategic plan."

Conclusions

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

- *Respected, collaborative leadership at various levels focused on student and professional learning.*

- *On-going professional work to build and sustain a common knowledge and language regarding education pedagogy, learning opportunities, student data and content area knowledge.*

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

- *Pervasive expectation of high levels of academic and intellectual engagement demonstrated by students and adults.*

- *Focused, efficient use of time to improve learning opportunities for students and staff.*

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

A Final Word of Thanks and Next Steps

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

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

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

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