

**Gorham High School - School-level Report**  
**Study of Higher Performing, More Efficient Maine Schools**  
**2010-2011**

**Report to Gorham School District**  
**from**  
**Maine Education Policy Research Institute**  
**and**  
**Center for Education Policy, Applied Research, and Evaluation**  
**The University of Southern Maine**

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**Study of Higher Performing, More Efficient Maine Schools, 2010-2011**  
**Visitors: Erika Stump and Ken Kunin**  
**March 8 & 9, 2011**

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 schools that have been identified as higher performing and efficient. CEPARE is exploring the significant practices and characteristics of higher performing, efficient schools and a group of average-performing, typical Maine schools in an effort to distinguish the attributes that have helped higher performing and efficient schools to excel.

The CEPARE research team is pleased that Gorham High School (GHS) agreed to be part of this important study of Maine schools. The school is part of Gorham School District and serves approximately 860 students in grades 9-12 from the town of Gorham, which is a suburban community in southern Maine. 20% of the student population is eligible for free and/or price-reduced lunch, 14% is identified as special education, and eight students have been identified as Limited English Proficiency.

CEPARE researchers Ken Kunin and Erika Stump visited Gorham on March 8 & 9, 2011 after meeting with principal Chris Record at an earlier date to prepare the schedule and gather additional information regarding the practices and characteristics of GHS. In all, the team conducted meetings with teachers, staff, students, parents, and principal 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, and 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 eight

key characteristics, which are often referenced in education research literature to describe higher performing schools. This report does not provide a complete description of this 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 eight areas. At the conclusion of the study in summer 2011, 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 on-going efforts.

**Characteristic #1: High standards and high expectations are held for all.** Research suggests that in higher performing schools this may be demonstrated in the following ways: high standards are communicated, understood, and expected for all students; all members of the learning community are aware of these academic and social targets.

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

- *GHS had a dual reporting system for report cards utilizing traditional grades and standards. While still a system that teachers and students reported was very much in progress, the process of getting to this point was credited with adding consistency in the curriculum, particularly in World Languages, and spurring development of common course assessments for all courses. Teachers in a number of groups cited the importance of the conversations about standards, which led to, among other things, the adoption of common textbook series for Algebra I, II and Geometry in order to facilitate the work of consistency across sections. More important perhaps, as indicated in the words of a number of teachers, it pushed the school to wrestle with the balance of highly valued teacher autonomy in designing engaging instruction and accountability for ensuring consistency of high academic standards in areas considered essential for all students.*
- *When standards were not being attained with consistency by a high percentage of students, the school was prepared to engage in self-examination and take action. We*

heard from faculty and staff that more ninth graders were noted to be struggling each year and the course failure rate for incoming students was increasing. The faculty engaged in a period of self-examination and determined to implement Freshmen Academies and a Freshmen BRIDGES (Building Relationships, Increasing Determination, Good Experience in School) alternative education program for high-risk students. It is notable that in the implementation of the Academies, the focus was not on students identifying with this new structure, such as belonging to a house, but rather to increase teacher collaboration to ensure clear communication of academic and behavioral norms and to facilitate ongoing teacher conversation about whether students are meeting expectations and to take quick action when students struggled. As one Academy teacher noted, consistent teacher reinforcement of fundamental skills was critical, "No matter where you do your writing, you should be rereading before you turn it in." The school recognized that while the tighter teacher teaming would support most students, it would not reach all. The Freshmen BRIDGES program was started for those students in need of a greater degree of intervention to ensure engagement and success.

- *There was a high expectation of involvement in athletics and other extra-curricular activities.* There was an equally high expectation about what involvement entails that appeared to serve the school in increasing student engagement and communicating academic, social and civic expectations. Students at the school participated in athletics and activities in numbers that reportedly greatly exceed the national average in high schools. In athletics for example, about 70% of the student body participated in at least one sport over the course of the year (the national average is approximately 48%). In order to participate in athletics, students had to meet clear academic eligibility requirements, varsity team members were required to engage in community service, and athletes and coaches were held to high standards of behavior. The Athletic Director (AD) noted that GHS didn't tolerate minor infractions of rules, thereby giving students the consistent message that the program had high standards.

**Characteristic #2: Leadership is effective and collaborative.** Research suggests that in higher performing schools this may be demonstrated in the following ways: the decision-making process is clear and focused on enhancing the learning of all students; members of the school community work collectively; conflicts are handled skillfully and respectfully.

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

- *While dealing with the same pressure to make immediate, extensive changes faced by many American public high schools, GHS managed to engage in focused change that served the needs of students.* In spite of the many initiatives begun at the school over the past seven years, we heard from a number of teachers that the district shields them from too much change at once. Various teachers indicated that the principals, both current and former, worked with the district to be clear when the plate at the high school was full and more could not be taken on without detracting from ongoing change efforts. We also heard faculty note, and observed over the course of our visit, that building administrators take care of faculty so that teachers can teach. At the same time, we heard teachers reflect back in various ways the three points of focus the principal had shared with us in our interview: improve teaching, increase learning and enhance climate. In interviews, teachers reported that major changes followed a cycle of research, planning and implementation and cited the Freshmen Academies as one recent example and work on examining the schedule as a current effort.
- *Teachers and students were involved in school leadership in various ways that impacted the life and direction of the school.* Department heads had autonomy in assigning courses and engaged teachers in a collaborative process for this. Department heads also formed a Leadership Team with a focus on academic issues that met regularly. School Council, comprised of ten teachers and ten students, served to consider student ideas and concerns in a collaborative brainstorming effort and to then make recommendations to the administration and school board. Recent concerns addressed by this council included cell phone use, cafeteria, schedule and late arrival. There were separate RTI leadership teams for academics and behavior that worked to connect students to interventions and to design new supports. A literacy data team met at least quarterly to review student achievement information and design short-term and long-term interventions.
- *School and district leadership paid careful attention to the teacher hiring process to find professionals who were innovative, engaging and willing to take risks to improve.* The principal noted that, “The big goal is to bring someone here that we want to be more like rather than hire someone to be more like us.” In order to make this happen, an interview panel including other teachers, students and administrators was constructed. After first interviews, candidates were invited back, often to present a lesson at a second interview. Two candidates’ names and

information were then forwarded to the superintendent with recommendations based on the panel's conclusions and the school's needs.

**Characteristic #3: Curricula and instruction engages students in a wide range of meaningful learning experiences, in which teachers guide and facilitate student learning and multiple types of interventions and adjustments are made to meet student needs.** Research suggests that in higher performing schools this may be demonstrated in the following ways: a focused and consistent curriculum; students are highly engaged in rigorous and relevant activities; a variety of interventions are used to ensure student progress.

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

- *Reading and writing was valued by teaching staff in all academic departments and taught across the curriculum.* A teacher indicated, "No matter where you do your writing, you should be re-reading before you turn it in." Classroom observations revealed research writing (I-Search) in all ninth grade English classes (including BRIDGES Alternative Program), as well as personal essays, five-paragraph essays, prompt-based essays, cover letters and resumes in other English classes. In other observations, students were writing Latin translations, Science lab reports, History position papers, and Math solution descriptions.
- *Curriculum and structural changes were implemented at the ninth grade level to better meet the needs of this specific grade-level student population.* Starting in Fall 2010, Freshmen Academies were put into place in order to have clear, consistent communication of academic expectations and attempt to address the increase in course failures. All ninth grade English curriculums incorporate the I-Search research paper assignment. In Fall 2011, a Freshman Focus course will be assigned as a supplement to the required English course for students needing academic support in literacy. BRIDGES program was recently developed and provided ninth graders a strong academic foundation with numerous experiential learning opportunities in a small, supportive group. At the start of their freshman year, students created a four-year plan with their guidance counselor.
- *Various academic interventions were being put into place, including on-going focus of utilizing Special Education educators for targeted instruction.* The Special Education staff re-organized and specialized several years ago to provide strong reading, writing, math, and organizational instruction. It was indicated at the administrative level that "Special Education teachers here are not just here to

help kids get caught up on their homework. They are here to provide specialized instruction.” The school was working deliberately to fill the Instructional Strategist position, which allowed for more direct teaching and collaboration by Special Education teachers.

- *Teaching staff valued collaboration, especially within their subject-area departments, as well as autonomy in pursuit of providing challenging, engaging courses.* A teacher noted, “[The students] get that we care about our subjects and want them to learn a lot.” 85% of classroom observations (n=78) identified 76% or more students engaged. Teachers believe “the spirit of the curriculum is common” but also appreciate working in a framework of autonomy and accountability. The English department created a common writing rubric for argument essays used within the department and shared with other departments. A Freshman Academy teaching team reported their work on an interdisciplinary unit incorporating History (time period), Science (astronomers), and English (*Romeo & Juliet*). Many resources were utilized by some teaching staff to incorporate technology in a manner that could enhance students’ education: all students had individual laptops since 2009, class-based wikis, online textbooks (especially used in Math classes), GoogleDocs (classroom editing and for Special Education student behavior reports), online courses, FirstClass communication system, video editing, etc. A teacher indicated that the “options are here.”

**Characteristic #4: Assessment data is examined, shared, and used in the school;**

**student mastery of competencies is assessed with a range of formative and summative assessments that are rigorous and valid.** Research suggests that in higher performing schools this may be demonstrated in the following ways: curriculum development, instruction, and intervention are informed by student performance; data is shared with students, parents, and community in an appropriate manner; appropriate assessment tools are selected and/or developed.

Through our observations, discussions, and exploration of policies and practices we identified some evidence of this characteristic, for example:

- *Professional teams analyzed data, recommended programming changes and supported implementation.* The Freshman Academies and BRIDGES Alternative Education program were developed after an analysis of student grades and attendance records. The Literacy Team met regularly and was responsible for analyzing school-wide data relating to literacy; their work guided the development of the Fall 2011 Freshman Focus course mentioned above. A Data Review Team met quarterly to identify students not meeting standards on NECAP in grades 8 and

11 as well as PSAT. Two RTI teams met frequently to determine interventions for students based on PSAT, SAT, common course assessments, 8<sup>th</sup> grade scores and grades, as well as parent and/or teacher referrals. Professional reflection also incorporated qualitative and quantitative data analysis: a district-wide Culture and Leadership Survey was completed by staff in December 2010, analyzed by Team Leaders, shared with staff and used to guide school wide planning.

- *Teaching staff understood the value of standardized assessments but also believed in the importance of engaging, relevant educational practices.* A teacher said, “The measure of success is that we have kids engaged doing something that they want to do and that they’re passionate about.” Once per year, teachers were provided professional development time to analyze SAT scores. The Math department used PSAT and SAT scores to develop grade-level targets and identify “bubble” students. The English department incorporated a school-wide SAT writing prompt taken by all students twice per year and received release time for common scoring as well as identifying trends and needs for instruction.

**Characteristic #5: Professional learning is effective and primarily focused on improving student learning.** Research suggests that in higher performing schools this may be demonstrated in the following ways: informative, focused professional learning is supported at all levels, from the classroom to the district office.

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

- *School-based leadership was working to increase communication and collaboration among staff.* The principal said, “I think the action is to get teachers in each other’s classrooms. That’s where the really significant improvement is going to happen...and talking about student work.” In the Freshman Academies “our big goal was to increase teacher collaboration and communication,” according to the principal. Freshman Academy teaching teams reported that they use their common planning time at least once per week. The Technology Integrator position recently became full-time and developed various professional development opportunities for staff: coaching, model lessons, focused small group sessions, release-day sessions directly relevant to specific curriculum, skill assessments, 10-minute tip at every staff meeting, and tips posted in staff areas.
- *Common time was provided for teachers, and when used collaboratively, teachers reported positive experiences.* Content area teachers had a daily planning period that was common department-wide. They also met district-wide for K-12

vertical discussions annually in content-area groups. As previously mentioned, teachers were also given professional development time once per year to analyze data regarding student performance on SAT/NECAP. Teachers reported and observations confirmed that regular staff meetings had a clear focus and positive culture, including technology tips, data analysis, program sharing and some general announcements. Early release days and in-services staff days have also been dedicated to “Unit Work,” a concept developed by Team Leaders in which teachers collaborate to create, develop or enhance a unit of study that incorporates technology and focuses on literacy or numeracy skills. Teachers indicated that this year’s decision by the principal to change Book Group discussions from one common book, previously What Great Teachers Do Differently by Todd Whitaker, to eight book options reflected his awareness of their diverse interests while still providing collaborative time during staff meetings to discuss and share their texts.

**Characteristic #6: Community members, the school committee, and district leadership are engaged in improving student learning.** Research suggests that in higher performing schools this may be demonstrated in the following ways: all stakeholders are informed supporters of on-going instructional improvement.

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

- *The community supported the learning vision of the school in varied and tangible ways.* The Gorham Education Foundation existed to support the efforts of teachers and schools and this past year funded teacher time to collaboratively score and analyze school-wide SAT style writing prompts, allowing teachers to both better understand student needs and assess school curriculum. With community support, many students engaged in two-week internships near the end of their senior year. We heard from groups of teachers, students and parents that the community historically showed great pride in their schools that was felt by teachers and students. As one parent noted, “There is a strong sense of community.”
- *The school had varied and tangible ways to support the community.* A number of staff spoke of the need for students to give back to their community for the tremendous support received over the course of their education and time spent participating in activities in Gorham. In order to march in graduation, all seniors had to complete a twenty-hour community service requirement, though many students far exceed this minimum. All varsity athletes were required to be

engaged in service. The AD believed that this reciprocal demonstration of school and town collaboration paid dividends in community support for school programs in general.

- *The school athletic programs and the town recreation programs had a longstanding, strong and close collaboration that benefitted both and that encouraged greater community support for all programs.* Parents noted that there was a clear mission and vision from both that were aligned and it was where “community and schools are blended.” Many school athletes provided support to the Gorham Recreation Department serving as officials, helping at clinics and working on field preparation. The community appeared to respond to this close collaboration with strong support for youth sports programs in general. In addition to ongoing sponsorships, businesses and local labor, through in kind support, expanded the concession area and bathroom facilities at no cost to the town. As the AD noted, “It would shock someone to know how much the community gets behind these programs to make them work.”

**Characteristic #7: School culture fosters strong, respectful, and equitable relationships for all.** Research suggests that in higher performing schools this may be demonstrated in the following ways: policies and practices of the school provide equitable access to learning that provides opportunities to meet high standards; school presents a safe, welcoming, and healthy environment in which all students are known well.

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

- *The climate of Gorham High School was visibly comfortable, safe, and positive.* Although all members of the school community acknowledged the school’s on-going work to address the “invisible” issues such as substance abuse and cyber-bullying, our observations revealed the use of respectful language and safe behavior in all areas of the building. A district-level administrator said, “The culture in this building is healthy.” The school had a full-time substance abuse counselor, involvement with the Center for Preventing Hate’s Unity Project, and three building administrators demonstrating the conscious effort to address these issues. Many members of the student body (including Special Education students) were involved in the “Ban the Word” campaign to stop using the “R” word by making signs posted prevalently throughout the building and creating a video posted on YouTube.

- *Many students appeared to have a strong relationship with at least one adult involved in their education.* The AD indicated that at least 70% of students were involved in at least one season of team sports. There were numerous clubs and school-sponsored extra-curricular activities. Students indicated that most students involved in an extra-curricular activity had a good or great relationship with the adult leader/coach. The school's schedule includes Advisory, which met twice per week during block scheduled days and remained a consistent group for four years, so that every student has a small group interaction with a staff member. Students indicated, and observations confirmed, that this time was used mostly for social interactions that allowed students to have a different relationship with teachers and get to know them on a more social level. There was also a Student Response Team that met weekly to assist students of concern.
- *Frequent recognition of student achievement occurred in various forms.* Student accolades were celebrated in newsletters, announcements, newspaper articles, and public displays throughout the school building. While athletic achievements were numerous, including school teams as well as the celebrated National Archery Champion (not a school-sponsored sport), other groups such as Drama, Music, Math Team, and Art were recognized. Students indicated that there was a great deal of school spirit, which culminated in pep rallies that were held for various achievements, not just athletics, about three times per year.

**Characteristic #8: Resource use is equitable and effectively supports student**

**learning.** Research suggests that in higher performing schools this may be demonstrated in the following ways: decision-making at all levels is driven by the goal of supporting the achievement of high standards by all students; focused strategies meet the school's ongoing program development and improvement goals connected to student learning.

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

- *A reorganization of special education services at the school and district level reportedly led to more focused instruction and more efficient use of staffing resources.* The special education staff was reorganized to shift one of the resource positions to an instructional strategist to provide much of the testing and program coordination, freeing up the other resource teachers to provide targeted skill instruction. The resource teachers then reorganized to "specialize" in reading, math or writing and organized their caseloads roughly around these areas of focus. At the same time, the district shifted identification practices to stress ongoing support for

students not meeting standards focused in part through response to intervention (RTI). Referrals district-wide have gone from 100 with an under 30% identification rate several years ago to 50 with a 68% identification rate last year, saving countless hours of testing and evaluation. As the Director of Instructional Support Services noted, "By the time we get these referrals we've done so much intervention work and gathered so much data that we really have a much clearer idea about what's going on with that kid and we can do much more focused evaluations" and we provided support in the meantime. Another result of reorganization leading to efficient use of resources was going from 22 out of district placements in 2006 to 3 today. Participation in the Sebago Education Alliance day treatment program placed eligible students in a therapeutic program at one third the cost of typical out of district options and which provides tighter curriculum alignment and the ability to more creatively manage return transitions given proximity and the fact the program was staffed with Gorham Schools employees.

- *The advent of the one to one laptop program in 2009 has accelerated the move toward a "paperless" school and greater use of online resources for learning.* While the school is years away from a true paperless system, efforts to move in this direction were clear in the classroom and the administrative offices. The Infinite Campus portal, e-mail, and wiki spaces were all cited by various groups as enhancing ongoing communication with parents. The school was also exploring on-line textbooks as eventual cost savers and back savers that will also allow students at various literacy levels more readily access content. In managing this valuable resource, the district technology staff also found that teachers who valued and regularly used the laptops with their students demonstrated a significantly reduced rate of repairs and inappropriate use from students.
- *Strong communication with and coordination of the numerous booster groups paid dividends in support for school programs.* As noted above, strong community support resulted in significant benefit to school programs. While there were booster groups for each team, the school worked to manage the communication to and coordination with the various groups. Booster group presidents met monthly with the AD to coordinate activities, especially important since boosters handled all ticket sales and concessions at contests. Coaches did not approach boosters directly with requests, but rather put requests in writing through the AD. For "bigger ticket" items, coaches put together a wish list. Emphasis was on pieces of equipment that can benefit multiple sports and teams, resulting in

purchase by booster groups of a number of expensive pieces that have greatly enhanced the athletic programs.

## **Conclusions**

Many wonderful practices were evident during our visit to Gorham High School. The strongest and most pervasive elements we saw in our review of documents, interviews, classroom observations, focus groups, and conversations during our two-day visit of your school included:

- ◆ *The school and the district have demonstrated a willingness to identify areas in need of improvement, both academic and social, and then maintain the focus and commitment to effect change.*
- ◆ *A solid core of teaching staff knowledgeable about their content area and demonstrating engaging, challenging practices.*
- ◆ *The school enjoys strong community support and in turn strongly supports the community.*
- ◆ *A culture of visibly respectful social behavior and an expectation of academic achievement.*

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 of the Gorham High 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 connect with Ken Kunin, Erika Stump or CEPARE director, David Silvernail.

We will continue our school visits across the state, then the research team at CEPARE will conduct a cross-case analysis of all schools in our study to identify common key practices and characteristics of Maine's higher performing and efficient 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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