

**William S. Cohen School – School-level Report  
Study of Higher Performing, Efficient Maine Schools  
2010–2011**

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

**May 2011**

**William S. Cohen – School–level Report**  
**Study of Higher Performing, Efficient Maine Schools, 2010–11**  
**Visitors: Richard Barnes & Sarah Wintle**  
**February 7 & 8 and March 17, 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 the William S. Cohen School agreed to be part of this important study of Maine schools. The school is part of the Bangor School Department and serves approximately 400 students in grades 6–8 from Bangor’s east side. Approximately 35% of the student population is eligible for free and/or price–reduced lunch, approximately 14% are identified as special education, and approximately 2% of students are designated as having limited English proficiency.

CEPARE Researchers Richard Barnes and Sarah Wintle visited the William S. Cohen School on February 7 & 8 and on March 17, 2011 after talking with principal Gary Gonyar at an earlier date to prepare the schedule and gather additional information regarding the practices and characteristics of the William S. Cohen School. During the two–day visit, researchers conducted meetings with teachers, staff, students, parents, and the 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 provide 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 findings 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

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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 ongoing 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 extensive evidence of this characteristic, for example:

- Throughout interviews and in numerous classroom observations, it was evident that all staff held high standards for student work and communicated them clearly to students. Staff and students readily articulated that academic learning is the focus in the school. “The rule in this school is that academics come first” in the words of a sixth grade student. The structure of the schedule, which provides opportunities for instructional differentiation within an overall framework of clear and firmly held academic standards, and the daily instructions for students’ tasks in most classrooms, was readily apparent to researchers.
- Students and their parents know what the school means by “high standards,” and accept them accordingly. Expectations for student work, spelled out in “agenda books” first assigned in elementary school, are referred to and followed by teachers, students, and parents. Students are aware that teachers expect them to take gradually increased responsibility for planning and executing both short-term assignments and long term projects, and that they are accountable for completing work correctly and on time. Researchers frequently observed teachers explicitly

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communicating these standards at the beginning or end of class, either by posting on a whiteboard, or in oral instructions, reminders to students about upcoming assignments and the rubrics to be used in measuring them.

- The school has developed structures that offer varied learning environments to challenge students to work at higher academic levels. The tutoring program that is available both during the school day and after school is well supported by teachers and used by students. The “extensions” program, a study hall intervention program designed to provide intensive instruction for every student scoring below the 55<sup>th</sup> percentile in reading and mathematics (a district-wide policy), is another avenue for extra academic instruction. Special education students, working in resource rooms, are expected to cover the same curricular content areas as students in regular classrooms. At the other end of the academic spectrum, an “honors challenge” is offered to all students who wish to accept extra responsibility for work that extends and enriches the basic school curriculum. Approximately one-third of the students in all three grades choose this option in one or more subject areas.
- High standards for student behavior and civility exist throughout the school. Staff members who have worked at other schools, parents who have children that have attended other schools, and students themselves all commented that the Cohen School is exceptional in creating and maintaining an atmosphere of courtesy and respectfulness in the school. One student remarked, “well, the school doesn’t tolerate bullying and, actually, I never see it happen here.” The ambience in the hallways and cafeteria seemed relaxed and friendly, among students and between students and staff.

**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 extensive evidence of this characteristic, for example:

- The principal is a visible leader, a collaborative manager, and effective communicator. Through observations and interviews with staff, students, and parents, the principal is credited with being a

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- very visible presence in the school's hallways and classrooms and for his ability to accept good ideas from many sources and put them into action. In virtually every focus group, people agreed that the principal welcomed feedback, responded quickly to problems, and worked hard to maintain a positive learning environment in the school. The team leadership group and individual professional and support staff members commented that the principal considered their viewpoints before making decisions that affected them. Leadership is distributed throughout the staff as well. Both teachers and the principal cited the leadership and responsibility delegated to other staff members as a crucial component in creating an effective learning environment.
- The principal and the assistant principal are present in classrooms and in the hallways daily, almost constantly interacting with students and staff. Each week the assistant principal draws up a shared schedule in which both he and the principal spend at least a few minutes in each classroom throughout the school. Teachers and students frequently commented that this practice both facilitates communication among staff, students, and administrators and provides reassurance that the school leaders are in touch with the important issues that impact the school's effective operation.
  - The principal effectively translates and implements the district's and the school's vision and goals into an organizational plan and schedule. In separate conversations, staff, students, and parents commented on Principal Gary Gonyar's proactive leadership in creating scheduling solutions that enhanced the school's ability to increase instructional time and reduce administrative minutiae without extending the formal instructional day or adding extra staff meetings. As one teacher put it, "Gary listens to our ideas on how to more effectively use our time for working with students who aren't meeting standards, and then creates a new schedule that allows us to do it."
  - Maintaining a climate of civility and respect is a high priority for administrators. In our interviews with the principal and in teacher focus groups, the assistant principal's quick response to instances of student misbehavior was frequently noted. Teachers also commented that they were well aware of their responsibility to be in prompt communication with parents about their students at the first sign of motivational or behavioral problems. Parents and students echoed this as well. As one parent noted, "small misbehaviors that would be ignored in [my child's] previous school

were quietly but effectively stopped here at Cohen as soon as it surfaced.”

**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:

- The school’s curriculum is focused horizontally across grade-level teams, and vertically among the three grades, as well as with the feeder intermediate school and the high school. Each subject area has an agreed upon set of content goals that are tied to district learning standards which are based on the Maine Learning Results. All students, whether in special education or in accelerated programs, are instructed in the required content and assessed regularly. In their focus group, sixth grade students were able to articulate how their assignments this year would prepare them for seventh grade work, and eighth graders expressed confidence that they would be well prepared for the challenges waiting for them in high school. The student “agenda books” serve as aids for students and parents to view and plan for meeting the expectations in each content area.
- The instructional program has a high degree of differentiation, with a robust offering of accelerated and remedial options, flexibly scheduled to permit individualization for each student. At each grade level, students are offered an “accelerated class” option, in which they can voluntarily assume an extra level of work that would extend the requirements for meeting the learning standard for the subject. For students under an IEP, the school maintains pullout resource rooms that engage smaller groups of 6–10 student in formal content area instruction taught by either special education teachers or Educational Technician IIIs. Although the skills may be taught at a slower pace with more individualized instruction, these students are expected to be engaged in learning the same content as their more accomplished peers. For students not under an IEP but still needing remediation based on their NECAP, Terra Nova or SRI assessment results, students are placed in a targeted math

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- class or tutoring (grade 6), or the “extensions” program for grades 7 and 8, which provides in-school tutoring during teachers’ planning periods instead of study halls. Beyond this, many students seek extra help in the after-school “Academic Pride” voluntary tutoring program run by individual teachers. A district-provided 4 pm activities bus allows any student to participate, and all non-academic sports programs are delayed by 30 minutes to encourage students to avail themselves of either tutoring or homework time. In addition, the Student Assistance Team reviews cases of students who show excessive absenteeism or below level performance. The nurse or guidance counselor will then consult with the grade level team to help tailor an appropriate intervention.
- Laptops are well integrated into the curriculum at all three grade levels. During our classroom observations we saw laptops being utilized for instruction approximately half of the time. Frequently students were asked to open their laptops to attend to a teacher-directed task. Just as often, students were asked to close their laptops and engage in either a general class discussion or a teacher-led question-and-answer session designed to provoke reflection on or extend student thinking on a computer-based assigned topic. Teachers, students and several parents commented on the value of the Infinite Campus program as an organizational and communications tool about student assignments and grades.
  - Several teachers have used laptops and MLTI resources to create more personalized instruction and formative assessments for students. We noted examples of teachers and students using the MLTI-supported Moodle software to provide more immediate and individualized feedback on formative assessments to students, who post their work on classroom blogs. Several teachers have created “portaportals” with the help of the school’s librarian, which they use as a guide to help students learn internet-based research skills.

**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 considerable evidence of this characteristic, for example:

- English language arts, mathematics, special education teachers, and Educational Technicians frequently cited the availability of assessment data to better target their instruction toward students' individual instructional level. The structure of the resource rooms, the lower-level sixth grade math class, and the tutoring and extension programs for lower performing students in all three grades was cited as a powerful structure for improving skills for underperforming students. However, many teachers in other subject areas, such as science or social studies, while expressing an interest and willingness to develop new strategies to differentiate their instruction based on students' reading or math proficiency levels, stated that they do not feel as confident as they would like in reading and math instruction.
- Parents are apprised of their child's performance levels and current assessment levels on standards. Through the Infinite Campus program, parents are able to track student assignments and teacher grades and comments in real time. The school has student-led conferences once a year, at which students, teachers, and parents together discuss the student's progress in meeting or exceeding the subject-area standard. When a child's instructional schedule is changed due to below-level performance, parents are notified via email or telephone, and agree to the schedule change.
- The school has developed a structure and an intervention plan to provide extra instruction for all students with math or ELA scores below the 55<sup>th</sup> percentile on the district's assessment program. The grade level teams meet weekly to assess the progress for each student who is performing below the target level. Based on these discussions, students are frequently referred for after school tutoring, given extra help during study hall sessions, or may even be placed in a different section within the team.
- The district has adopted grade level standards and rubrics in the major subject areas, which provide an array of formative and summative assessments. Teachers reported that they meet weekly in grade level teams, and at key times during the year in vertical teams, to review the appropriateness of the benchmarks for common standards and students' progress on them. This was confirmed in the researchers' interview with the Superintendent of Schools, but use of these multiple assessments was not observed directly.

**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:

- The district supports extensive, embedded professional development efforts, and the school utilizes a variety of meeting formats to extend professional learning to the individual teacher level. The superintendent, the principal and several teachers referred to the importance of periodic district-sponsored vertical team meetings between schools to improve for curriculum alignment. All classroom teachers appear to be involved in these meetings as part of the district's professional development program. In addition, the school leadership team periodically meets with its counterparts from other schools to monitor and refine both grade level and discipline level curriculum goals and standards. The regular flow of communication and work back and forth from the district level working groups, to leadership team, to the grade level team appears to be an embedded practice at the school.
- Teachers remain committed to regular, collaborative professional development despite the loss of time for meetings during the regular school day. In an effort to create more effective intervention strategies as part of the school's RTI and Student Assistance Team's plan, teachers agreed to sacrifice their regular in-school team meeting time in order to create more instructional time for students. These teams now meet weekly before school and before the beginning of their regularly scheduled workday.
- Principal works to schedule outside consultants, and for teachers to consult with each other, in small groups to promote embedded, personalized professional development. The principal reported, and the researchers observed, that consultants are frequently scheduled to work with teachers in the midst of regular school days with minimal or no disruption to the student work day. An MLTI consultant from the state department of education was observed meeting with three teachers and the technology integrator during the teachers' planning period to offer assistance to teachers on the practical problems that arose when they were developing new Moodle-based materials for their students or their colleagues.

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**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 extensive evidence of this characteristic, for example:

- The school works to create strong communication links between staff, parents, and students. Students, parents, and teachers cited the value of the Infinite Campus program as a way for parents and students to monitor students' learning. Although it is not clear how many parents use this online tool, it is available and referred to when teachers communicate with parents via telephone or email. Another vehicle for maintaining strong communication links is the use of student-led conferences, where students present their work to their parents on parent-teacher conference days. The school's policy of having every parent involved before any change in child's instructional program is implemented is another indication of the effort to build home-school alliances to support students' academic efforts. The emphasis on students' use of the "agenda books," and the need for parents to sign them for some assignments was cited by some of the students in focus groups.
- The entire school community works together to support academic success as well as athletics at the school. In interviews with administrators as well as in focus groups with school food service staff, parents, and teachers, the academic awards night was cited as one of the highlights of the school year. Teachers take the lead in preparing food and supporting the ceremony. Although athletics maintain a prominent role in the school, parents and teachers noted that celebrating academic success is the only evening awards program sanctioned by the school.
- The school committee and the superintendent maintain a district-wide focus on improving student learning, and provide time and structures for addressing this at all school levels. In weekly administrative team meetings with all principals, in periodic meetings of teacher-leader teams across school levels, and in cross-school vertical team meetings by teaching disciplines, the district leadership reinforces the school's efforts to constantly review learning standards and students' progress against district benchmarks.

**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:

- Students, parents and staff all agree that the school maintains a strong culture of respect, civility, and a focus on students as learners and citizens. In virtually every focus group, participants said that the culture of caring and respect between teachers and students was the most outstanding characteristic of the school, right alongside the focus on academic learning. The school's guidance counselor is a visible presence in team meetings, on the Student Assistance Team, and through direct class instruction in her "Education and Career Planning." Interviewees credited students, teachers, and administrators with monitoring each other in maintaining this culture: teachers monitor hallways regularly, and both teachers and the assistant principal follow up on behavioral infractions promptly. In their focus groups, some students reported that incidents of bullying or disrespectful behavior were rare, while others claimed never to have witnessed any bullying at the school. Some students also reported that they were proud of their accomplishments at the Cohen School, and voiced confidence that they were being well prepared for the challenges awaiting them in high school.
- Teachers are very strong in their support for one another. Parents as well as teachers and administrators made this observation, citing it as a source of strength in the school's culture. Many staff members commented that they work hard to maintain a positive learning environment, and helped each other in maintaining morale and commitment. Several added that they socialize together outside of school as well. However, one teacher commented that she was "not much of a joiner," but that she, too, felt supported and respected by her colleagues.
- Strong relationships exist between parents and the school. Parents reported that they felt welcomed by the staff and administration from the beginning of their child's enrollment, and that they felt

strongly that the teachers and administrators held high expectations for their children's academic, social and emotional well-being. The Boosters Club was cited as the parents' institutional partner with the school staff in maintaining this strong culture in the school.

- The school maintains an active tradition of promoting clubs, intramural sports and social activities that promote school pride and a sense of belonging. One of the school's physical education teachers serves as the coordinator of the after school activities, and in all interviews people praised her efforts to create activities that engaged the largest possible number of students in extra-curricular activities ranging from chess club to intramural volleyball. Several parents commented that middle school dances were more fun for the students than high school dances were, because this teacher worked hard to get all students involved on the dance floor. In other interviews people cited the Cohen School "square dance tradition," and commented that it is a highlight of school alumni events.

**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:

- The school district's late afternoon activity bus, and an early morning bus for music students provide a low-cost way for the school to extend the learning day for students. Although the "late bus" appears as an extra expense in the district's budget, researchers saw evidence that it allowed a significant number of students to take part in after school clubs, extra tutoring, or recreational activities that would otherwise be unavailable to many, if not most of them. A high percentage of Cohen School teachers participate in offering these activities, in part because of the number of students who are able to participate and enjoy the more informal learning opportunities that the activities present. Researchers noted a heavy student use of the library as a quiet

- study hall during the day or a supportive place to work on homework or projects after school.
- The staff uses a number of tools available through MLTI- and district-supported software to extend their personal instructional strategies into the homework domain. Teachers' use of "portaportals," created with the help of the school librarian, was seen as an efficient and effective way to extend students' learning environment beyond the formal school day. Using the student and parent sections of the Infinite Campus program to encourage parental engagement and formative assessments for students provided another example. The principal's effort to embed professional development within the regular school day was also noted. Technical support from a MDOE funded MLTI consultant helped teachers develop teacher and student blog posts using Moodle, and teachers themselves took initiatives to teach these skills to one another.
  - Teachers make extra efforts to create and maximize instructional time for students throughout the school day. In 85% of the researchers' classroom walkthrough observations, nearly every student was engaged in the lesson at hand. These observations held up at the beginnings and ends of class times as well as in the middle. In addition, the ability to engage students in "time on task" has been increased significantly by the teachers' voluntary reduction of in-school planning periods and through an agreement to move their professional team planning times to a before school hour. Teachers have maximized the best use of staff talents by agreeing to specialize in student duties—some teachers volunteer to carry out extra supervisory duties during study hall, lunch or before and after school, while others engage in small group or individual student tutoring.

## **Conclusions**

Many very effective practices were evident during our visit to the Cohen 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:

- ◆ A dedicated, focused, and knowledgeable staff (principal, educators, and support staff) that allocates its time and resources to support a focus on student learning.
- ◆ Embedded, pervasive culture of respect and caring amongst students and adults.

- ◆ Consistent high social and academic standards for all members of the school community upheld by appropriate consequences and positive models.
- ◆ High involvement, support, and connection with community.

These were the observations made during the course of our study, 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 each and 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 William S. Cohen School. We learned a great deal about your school and also about how to make our visitations even smoother and more productive. 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 contact Richard Barnes, Sarah Wintle, or CEPARE director, David Silvernail.

We will continue our school visits across the state in the months ahead. Then, the research team at CEPARE will conduct a cross-case analysis of all schools 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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