



Improving Student Learning in Maine: Peninsula K-8 School

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Peninsula Elementary School Case Study

Peninsula School is a K-8 school located in the picturesque coastal town of Prospect Harbor that serves students from the communities of Winter Harbor, Gouldsboro, Corea, and Birch Harbor. The school was built in 2009 as part of the newly consolidated Regional School Unit 24, encompassing 12 communities along the Down East Coast of Maine. Prior to the consolidation, each community had its own school, serving a small number of students each. The consolidation has been a significant change for these communities as they now have one district, with one school board, which serves approximately 2,400 students.

Economic conditions in the community looked bleak when, in 2010, the area's major employer, Stinson Seafood, shut down its sardine canning plant. But the outlook is brighter since a lobster processing company opened in its place in the summer of 2013 and began to hire people from the community. There is also a small amount of farming in the area—blueberries, apples, and potatoes—but the number of jobs available is small.

Through the economic ups and downs, the area has a pretty stable population. Families tend to stay in the area and the school sees few families move in or out. The school enrolls 212 students, which is more than the 165 students the new building was originally built to house. Sixty-three percent of students at the school qualify for free- or reduced-priced lunch, 15% are students with disabilities, and seven students are English Language Learners.

Student performance has improved significantly in several subject areas and grade levels in recent years. Table 1 provides performance data on the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) from 2010 to 2012 in math, reading, and science. Percent Proficient/Advanced and percent Advanced exists for each subject area at different grade spans. Notable data in Table 1 includes:

- Performance in Reading Grades 6-8 has increased significantly from 53% to 72% Proficient/Advanced.
- Performance in Math Grades 3-5 has increased from 51% to 62% Proficient/Advanced. The Advanced category more than tripled from 5% to 16%.
- Performance in Math Grades 6-8 has increased from 48% to 58% Proficient/Advanced. The Advanced category has increased from 15% to 21%.
- Performance in Science Grade 8 has increased significantly from 61% to 84% Proficient/Advanced. The Advanced category has more than doubled from 17% to 37%.

Table 1
Peninsula Performance (2010-2012 NECAP)
All Students

Subject and Performance Level	2010 NECAP	2011 NECAP	2012 NECAP
Math			
Grade 3-5			
Proficient/Advanced	51%	51%	62%
Advanced	5%	16%	16%
Grade 6-8			
Proficient/Advanced	48%	64%	58%
Advanced	15%	19%	21%
Reading			
Grade 3-5			
Proficient/Advanced	67%	64%	73%
Advanced	10%	5%	17%
Grade 6-8			
Proficient/Advanced	53%	64%	72%
Advanced	0%	4%	2%
Science			
Grade 5			
Proficient/Advanced	63	46	61
Advanced	11	0	22
Grade 8			
Proficient/Advanced	61%	77%	84%
Advanced	17%	8%	37%

Table 2 exhibits the same information for students identified as economically disadvantaged. These performance indicators exhibit significant gains in certain subcategories of the NECAP assessment. Table 2 gives details on the movement of performance scores for ED students from 2010 to 2012 and shows the following:

- Performance for ED students in Math Grades 6-8 has increased from 41% to 56% Proficient/Advanced. The Advanced category increased from 15% to 20%.
- Performance for ED students in Reading Grades 3-5 has increased from 58% to 68% Proficient/Advanced. The Advanced category more than doubled from a low of 3% to 11%.
- Performance for ED students in Reading Grades 6-8 has increased significantly from 39% to 65% Proficient/Advanced.
- Performance for ED students in Science Grade 8 has increased from 56% to 63% Proficient/Advanced. The Advanced category more than doubled from 11% to 25%.

Table 2
Peninsula Performance (2010-2012 NECAP)
Economically Disadvantaged Students

Subject and Performance Level	2010 NECAP	2011 NECAP	2012 NECAP
Math			
Grade 3-5			
Proficient/Advanced	50%	33%	50%
Advanced	0%	9%	13%
Grade 6-8			
Proficient/Advanced	41%	61%	56%
Advanced	15%	18%	20%
Reading			
Grade 3-5			
Proficient/Advanced	58%	46%	68%
Advanced	3%	0%	11%
Grade 6-8			
Proficient/Advanced	39%	68%	65%
Advanced	0%	4%	0%
Science			
Grade 5			
Proficient/Advanced	73%	43%	50%
Advanced	18%	0%	8%
Grade 8			
Proficient/Advanced	56%	57%	63%
Advanced	11%	0%	25%

This case study provides information regarding how Peninsula achieved such increases in academic performance. The case is based on written documents as well as fall 2013 interviews with the superintendent, principal and key staff. The case is part of a study of the Maine school funding system being conducted for the Maine Legislature by Lawrence O. Picus & Associates. The case has the following eight sections: School Staff, Goals, School Schedule, Curriculum and Instruction Program, Assessments, Interventions, Professional Development, School Culture, and a Summary.

School Staff

Peninsula employs 20.0 full time certified staff, 6.4 paraprofessionals (4 of whom are special education technicians), and 1.0 classified staff. Staff FTE are listed below:

- 1.0 Principal
- 12.0 Core Classroom Teachers (for an overall class size average of 17)
- 1.7 Specialist Teachers
 - 0.5 Music
 - 0.6 Art
 - 0.6 Physical Education
- 0.4 Librarian
- 1.5 Extra Help Staff
 - 1.0 Title 1 Tutor
 - 0.5 Reading Recovery Teacher
- 1.4 Pupil Support
 - 0.8 Guidance Counselor
 - 0.6 Nurse
- 2.0 Special Education Certified Staff
 - 2.0 Special Education Teachers
- 4.0 Special Education Technicians
- 2.0 Instructional Technicians
- 0.4 Library Technician
- 1.0 Secretary

In addition to the staff listed above, the school has access to a number of district resources on an as-needed basis, including an ESL teacher, social worker, occupational/physical therapist, and school psychologist. The specialist teachers and librarian, too, are shared district resources, with staff coming to the school for certain days of the week.

School Goals

Peninsula has chosen to adopt the district goals as its school goals. They are:

1. All students will achieve at least one year's growth in reading and math, and
2. 75% of all students will meet or exceed all growth targets, as measured by NWEA.

School Schedule

The day begins at 8:00 a.m. and ends at 2:50 p.m. for all students in the school, but the schedule is different for grades K-2, 3-5, and 6-8. The K-2 grades, in self-contained classrooms, have 3 instructional blocks totaling 335 minutes with a 15-minute and a 30-minute recess in addition to the a 30-minute lunch. The 3-5 grades, also self-contained, have 3 instructional blocks totaling 350 minutes, with 2 15-minute recesses and a 30-minute lunch. The 6-8 middle grades, which

move from class to class, have 4 blocks per day, 85-90 minutes each, totaling 360 instructional minutes. The middle grades have a 20-minute lunch in addition to a 10-minute morning snack and 20-minute recess in the afternoon. Grades 6 and 7 have 90-minute blocks for English Language Arts and math. The 8th grade is configured a bit differently, with 90-minute blocks for 2 days and an hour the rest of the week.

Curriculum and Instructional Program

Peninsula has recently begun using *SpringBoard* as their English Language Arts curriculum program in grades 6-8. Published by the College Board, *SpringBoard* is based on the College Board Standards for College Success and is meant to prepare 6-12 graders for success in Advanced Placement classes and college. The district adopted the curriculum in high school last year, has seen positive results, and has extended its use into the middle grades. The school uses Lucy Calkins writing curriculum in K-5.

Peninsula is also using *SpringBoard* as its math program in grades 6-8, replacing *Saxon Math*, and it continues to use *Everyday Math* in grades K-5. There is confidence that *SpringBoard* is aligned to the Common Core and the program extends into the high school. Teachers are also doing their own alignment of *Everyday Math* to the Common Core.

School leadership likes that the *SpringBoard* curriculums are not commercially developed, but are research based and that practitioners, and not sales people, provide the professional development.

Teachers can also supplement with materials they find useful. One teacher, for example, sees that students become competent readers through practice and so she assigns additional readings.

As part of the Maine Laptop Initiative, all 7th and 8th graders in the school have laptops and teachers in math, ELA and social studies have been able to load them with instructional content. There is some concern with the resulting strain on the district's IT resources, but overall, it appears to be an instructional advantage to have access to the web-based content.

Assessments

Table 3 shows the core elements of the reading and math programs at Peninsula, including assessments used throughout the year. The primary summative assessment used is the state assessment, NECAP, administered in the fall of the school year to students in grades 3-8. In addition to the state assessment, Peninsula uses the Northwest Evaluation Association's *Measure of Academic Progress (MAP)* in grades 3-8 and *Children's Progress Academic Assessment (CPAA)*, a set of online computer adaptive tests, as benchmark assessments and to monitor progress over the course of the year.

Table 3
Core Elements of the Reading and Math Programs, Interventions, and Assessments

	Reading Program	Math Program
Core Curriculum/Program	SpringBoard (6-8)	SpringBoard (6-8)
	Lucy Calkins Writing (K-5)	Everyday Math (K-5)
Core Program Augmentation	Reading Recovery	IXL
	Individual Learning Plan	Individual Learning Plan
Assessments	NWEA's MAP (3-8)	NWEA's MAP (3-8)
	NWEA's CPAA (K-1)	NWEA's CPAA (K-1)
	SpringBoard (6-8)	SpringBoard (6-8)
	Fountas and Pinnell	

The introduction of the new curriculums provides a more formalized assessment system for the school. The school has also expanded the use of the NWEA assessments by adding the CPAA in the earlier grades. The school also uses the Fountas and Pinnell screening assessments to diagnose challenges in literacy.

Interventions

Early elementary students struggling with literacy receive one-to-one reading support from the Reading Recovery teacher in the school. The program is expensive because of the one-to-one instruction, but the school finds it very effective. The next level of intervention provided for all students K-8 is small group instruction provided by the Title 1 and Reading Recovery teachers.

The support for students struggling in math is less formalized and includes some small group instruction from the Title 1 teacher and the use of IXL Math, an online practice program, aligned to the Common Core, where students practice key concepts. The online system allows teachers to monitor student work and track progress.

Students whose second language is English receive instruction from the district's ESL teacher who works with students on specific objectives. The district uses an English proficiency test to determine the interventions needed and the instruction happens as a pullout during regular classroom time.

Peninsula has made use of the results from the MAP to create its Bulldog Watch List—a way of tracking student progress and making sure that struggling students stay on track. In its third year, the Bulldog Watch List is a tool for teachers, individually and in their PLCs, to closely monitor student progress more frequently. Students who score below the 50th percentile in MAP are put on the list and receive an Individual Learning Plan. PLCs use the list as they look at data, and the school principal and counselor use the list to follow up on student progress.

The Individual Learning Plan (ILP) contains the same elements for all grade levels. These are:

- Data/Important Information—all available assessments and screening information is recorded throughout the year
- Improvement Goals—a description of the challenges faced by the student, based on data; the goals that will address the student's need; and the instructional action steps that will be taken to address the need
- Higher Level Supports/Tier 2—a list of possible interventions, with a space for a description of how that will be carried out. The list includes after/before school tutoring; mentoring/volunteer help; homework assistance; computer assisted instruction; remedial services (Title 1, LLI), guidance counselor; and other
- Individual Learning Plan Review Notes—a place for the school to track any meetings or events that affect the plan, record participants, and document next steps, and
- Individual Learning Plan Commitment—where the school, parents, and students sign their commitment to the plan.

The school principal indicated that the Bulldog Watch List and ILP have facilitated teachers talking with each other and the counselor and principal. It also facilitates communications with parents. The school is continuing to refine the use of the Bulldog Watch List, but can see results—last year 47% of students on the list made it off the list by the end of the year.

Before and after school tutoring is available to students and it is one of the Tier 2 intervention option in the ILP, but the availability varies by the amount of Title 1 resources are available in a given year. The school does not offer summer school, other than the summer program for special education students whose IEP requires it. The number of days and hours is also determined by the IEP.

Professional Development

The district has invested heavily in professional development. Part of this is the result of district leadership's effort to bring the newly formed RSU 24 together, aligned toward common goals. It is also a way to offer teachers an opportunity to talk to each other across schools (what would have formerly been across districts). This district-wide collaboration is particularly important because, given the size of schools, teachers were often the only teacher in their position (e.g., 3rd grade, art, or middle grade science).

Table 4 shows the type of professional development opportunities for teachers at Peninsula. Each teacher has a 45- to 60-minute planning and prep time 4 days a week, an hour each week for grade span PLCs, and 5 days throughout the year for workshops.

Table 4
Professional Development for Teachers at Peninsula

Type	Time Allocated
Individual planning	4 days 45-60 minutes, depending on specials
Collaborative Work with other teachers	1 hour each week for PLCs
Pupil-free days for PD	5 days, throughout the year.

Professional Learning Communities are part of the district focus on professional development. Every Friday, time is allotted to allow for teachers to meet weekly with grade span teams for one hour, where the focus has been on literacy and, in Peninsula, reviewing Bulldog Watch List data. All teachers and the instructional technicians are part of a PLC. Meetings have an agenda with a specific topic for each meeting. The school principal monitors the agenda, minutes, and the progress of the group. The first Friday of every month, specialist teachers across the district get together for similar collaborative work.

The district is part of the Maine Content Literacy Project, a project administered by the Maine Department of Education and funded by a federal Title IIA grant. Along with the literacy PD that the partnership provides, the district has provided DuFour training for PLC facilitators at each school; the DuFour's are among the country's leading experts on PLCs. The district has also purchased Rubicon Atlas, an online tool that allows teachers to talk to each other and map their work in PLCs. There are also regular "dine and discuss" sessions for facilitators to talk about what is going on in their teams.

The district has been able to support PD activities at Peninsula and its other schools through Title I, Title II, and a couple of School Improvement Grants. The district is also part of the Physical Science Partnership that pays for substitute teachers.

School Culture

Interviewees described the school and each other as "professional," "academic focused," a place where teachers "enjoy the fact that students come eager to learn," and where, "expectations are high for students." The school enjoys a veteran staff (with an average of 20 years teaching) with very little turnover. In this environment, teachers have an opportunity to really get to know students and the kind of approach that works best for them. Middle grade teachers, for example, will have had a student in class for three years by the end of the 8th grade.

And the size of the school is optimal; it's large enough that the school can offer a variety of instructional programs, but not so large that students get lost in the shuffle. "It still feels like a family." To address behavior and discipline, the school implements the Positive Behavior

Intervention Strategies program, focusing on three major principles: responsibility, respect, and safety.

The school also enjoys strong parental and community support. The Parent Teacher Committee is very active, meets once a month, and engages in fundraising activities for the school. They sponsor a very nice dinner every year for the teachers and provide gifts to all people who work with students, including classified staff. If money is available, they provide money to each classroom for supplies. In one year they paid for all grade level field trips. The committee also provides a forum for discussion of school-related issues. The big 8th grade trip is also funded by parents and requires about \$10,000 to make the trip happen.

The school communicates regularly with parents through weekly newsletters and a Facebook page. Teachers also communicate regularly with parents.

School leadership knows that that much is expected from teachers—instruction, professional development, implementing programs—and that they have a responsibility to their teachers. “If we expect a lot from them, we have to be there to support them.”

Summary

Peninsula School, with support from the district, has a clear focus on professional development for teachers and the use of data to inform the interventions they provide to students, “We are data driven, but not data crazy.” Teachers have a dedicated time each week for Professional Learning Communities and even though, as one teacher put it, “that hour goes superfast,” it is a valuable resource for teachers and students.

The Bulldog Watch List outlines for all—teachers, parents, students, and school leadership—a clear path for improvement. The data, goals, action steps, interventions, and commitment of key parties are documented and monitored so that students who fall behind do not stay behind for long. Teachers make heavy use of the list in their PLCs and the school counselor and principal use it to monitor student progress.

The interventions provided to students such as one-to-one and small group tutoring are effective and the school is proud of the number of students who have moved off the Bulldog Watch List as a result. But those interventions are largely supported through the school’s Title 1 allocation, which is made on a per pupil basis. This makes it an unstable resource and a cause of concern from year to year. Class size is another resource the school feels is important, particularly with the transition to the more rigorous Common Core standards. Peninsula tries to keep class size under 20 for its classrooms, but there are some classes that are larger. Because of the state’s school funding formula and the loss of state aid to the district, there is concern that class sizes will increase and have a negative impact on students.

It should be clear that the overall set of strategies deployed in this school is aligned with the theory of improvement built into the Evidence-Based model. The school has a school wide curriculum in reading and math that is well articulated. The school is serious about collaborative groups, establishing Professional Learning Communities and has employed some of the

country's top experts in designing and operating PLCs to help the faculty organize and run their PLCs. Teachers in this school work in collaborative, PLC groups, which meet at least once a week, using multiple sets of student data in an effort to continuously improve the instructional program, identify students who need extra help or interventions, and monitor the impact of those interventions on students over time.

The school has a "watch" list for any student performing in the bottom half. For each of those students an individualized learning program is developed that provides multiple interventions to help them get back on track and remain on a course toward proficiency. The interventions begin with one-to-one tutoring in the early grades and continue with small group tutoring and before and after school academic help. The school also seeks to maximize its access to online content available to all 7th and 8th graders as a result of the Maine Laptop Initiative.

The school views itself as having a professional culture that is academically focused and has high expectations for all students, regardless of their family or economic background. All these strategies are reinforced by class sizes that generally are under 20 students. Over the past three years, the school has produced impressive results not only for its students overall but also for its economically disadvantaged students, so the school has pushed forward both on excellence and equity.