



# School Learning Laboratory

## Waterford Memorial School MSAD #17

The Waterford Memorial School (WMS) – a small rural school in the Oxford Hills School District (MSAD #17) – serves 128 students in grades K-6, with 7 classroom teachers and a staff of 22-25 that includes maintenance, kitchen, transportation and itinerant personnel. Waterford is a rural community nestled amidst lakes and mountains with an increasingly older population. The school's PTO is active and supportive, and a community recreational program (WREC) is housed in the school and provides recreational support. A district 21st Century Grant has enhanced the recreation program with funding to support after school and enrichment activities.

WMS staff is actively involved in the long-term, district-led work to identify learning outcomes, develop assessments, and implement instructional strategies to support student achievement. In fact, this work, particularly in the areas of Mathematics and Language Arts – has taken up the majority of the staff's energies in recent years. Last year the school revised its Home-School Compact, involving parents and teachers in identifying a vision for the school and articulating the responsibilities that stakeholders have for student learning and well-being. The school was became a part of the SuperEd/School Learning Laboratory (SLL) project in the fall of 2005.

### **The Need**

The four-member WMS SLL Team identified three needs, two of which dealt with the issues of improving the school climate, culture and collegiality. In September, the Collaborative Review with Super Ed members affirmed these needs and identified possible outcomes for such a project. The WMS SLL Team wanted its project to create:

- A safe and healthy environment for staff to interact.
- Reduced isolation of teaching and ways for staff to feel more connected and share best practices in order to build a community of professionals who both work and learn together.
- Creative solutions regarding the use of time and resources (e.g. use of weekly meetings, release time, volunteers, summer, on-the-job learning, etc.)
- A staff developed plan for creating a safe and healthy climate for learning.

### **The Intervention**

The West Paris staff elected to work with Mary Jane McCalmon from the Maine Center for Educational Services in Auburn, ME. She and the school principal, Margeret Emery, became primarily responsible for scheduling time with the staff. The project aimed at the following outcomes:

1. Create and sustain a safe and healthy environment for staff to interact.
2. Reduced isolation of teaching and ways for staff to feel more connected and share best practices in order to build a community of professionals who both work and learn together.
3. Creative solutions regarding the use of time and resources (e.g. use of weekly meetings, release time, volunteers, summer, and on-the-job learning, etc.).
4. A staff-developed plan for creating a safe and healthy climate for learning.

The Center consultant and the principal arranged for a series of meetings during the school year, starting in the fall of 2005 through the fall of 2006. Typically, the staff met with the consultant during after-school staff meetings. The consultant designed and executed a four-phase process to address the identified outcomes. First, the staff explored the conditions that existed in the school. Second, staff members identified a set of goals for the professional community they wanted to create. Third, the consultant helped them define the parameters of the professional community, its purpose, structures, processes and practices.

### **Noticeable Results**

In the fall of 2006 eight teachers from the Waterford staff completed an open-ended survey. This data collection



# School Learning Laboratory

**Waterford Memorial School**

**MSAD #17**

**(continued)**

and analysis shows that there are several noticeable results from the intervention.

1. Teachers report that they devote more time to talk and work together as colleagues.
2. They also report less isolation. They now meet regularly each week in school-based “professional learning communities” where they talk about new ideas and discuss best practices.
3. Together, staff members developed and are refining ways in which they can work together, observe each other and talk informally and formally about how to improve reading and classroom practices.

Staff members report that the SLL process was productive and beneficial to the school.

“Working with Mary Jane helped us realize what we already do and what we want to do to improve.”

“The opportunity to simply sit together as a staff, prioritize and focus (since we can’t “fix it all”) was invaluable! We have never afforded ourselves the luxury of doing this in the past.”

“Setting a school-wide goal for reading and working collaboratively toward that promotes “team” thinking, which helps school and staff morale.”

## **Learnings**

1. First, building professional community is labor intensive and ongoing, requiring an effort that is sustained over time. The work in Waterford took longer than anticipated, and it will continue after the consultant completes the contracted work.
2. Second, the role of the principal is central to the success of the effort. The school in Waterford has had a part-time principal for a number of years, a structure that is clearly inadequate.
3. Third, school personnel often need professional support in attending to organization development issues. The Center consultant provided much-needed expertise in designing and facilitating processes to help the staff focus its efforts and use its time effectively and efficiently. Schools have been expending whatever time and energy available on meeting the academic needs of students in response to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This means that they have spent less and less time on organizational development to support school reform and improvement (e.g. visioning, planning, building collaborative cultures, leadership).