

CAPTAIN ALBERT STEVENS SCHOOL: AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA) works with schools throughout the world in various ways. The most focused and concentrated of QISA's efforts are school partnerships known as Demonstration Sites. Captain Albert Stevens School (CASS) is one of QISA's first Demonstration Sites.

Captain Albert Stevens School is located in the coastal community of Belfast, Maine. Several years ago, escalating costs and declining enrollment forced three small rural schools together into the newly built Captain Albert Stevens School. Seeing the pending merger as an opportunity to create a new school culture, the district became a QISA Demonstration Site in the year prior to the new building opening. The principal, Susan Inman, wanted to adopt an educational vision for CASS that would unite the new staff, improve teaching and learning, and directly affect and involve students. The Quaglia Institute's [Guiding Principles](#) of Self-Worth, Active Engagement, and Purpose were the ideal framework to achieve this vision.

Preparing for Change

In the year prior to the merger, the principal and QISA spent time working with each staff on articulating their educational beliefs, assumptions, and philosophies. Staff members were given time to think about how QISA's guiding principles and the [8 Conditions that Make a Difference®](#) supported their *current* educational beliefs. Rather than imposing a common vision, a common set of assumptions surfaced that were aligned with QISA's principles and conditions.

When class configurations, curriculum, student placement or staffing issues arose, several basic questions were posed:

- How does this decision affect the individual student?
- How will we build community through this program?
- How will this decision support all forms of accomplishment?
- What leadership opportunities are we providing our students?

Susan Inman, the principal, says the guiding principles became a way, to "*focus on the whole child, each day and in all that we do as a school community.*" The 8 Conditions became touchstones for all decisions made about the new school.

The early years of the Demonstration Site partnership confirmed that new buildings exude both excitement and anxiety. Newness and opportunity are exciting, yet stability and familiarity are comforting. The principal felt that "*moving into a new building was the perfect opportunity to create a student-centered school where each child is valued and listened to.*" From the beginning, student and staff voice was valued at CASS.

Within the first two months, the [My Voice©](#) student and staff surveys were used to understand various perspectives of the school.

Among other findings, the staff survey revealed that:

- 50% of staff said they feel valued for their unique skills and talents.
- 43% of staff said they feel their opinion is valued at school.
- 29% of staff said they feel comfortable eating in the teacher's room.

As a follow-up, all staff members were interviewed to ensure that interpretations of the data were correct. These interviews included discussions with educational technicians, custodians, cafeteria workers, and bus drivers. In the early going, many expressed feeling isolated and not valued. Student survey results and interviews revealed similar feelings. In k-2 focus groups, many students said *“the school is too big and I don't know many people here.”* Students worried about getting lost if they ventured off their wing of the building.

Into Action

An Aspirations Leadership Team was created to focus on the school's vision. In order to involve the entire staff in the change process, one staff meeting a month was dedicated to developing and implementing ideas related to aspirations. All staff chose to be on one of three Self-Worth teams. Each team, in turn, developed short, medium, and long term actions which evolved from their team's self chosen goal.

One team with the goal to “recognize that success comes in all forms” created avenues to recognize and celebrate successes beyond (yet still including) standardized test scores and grades. Student recognition included citizenship boxes, literary magazines highlighting all types of student work, stars for students, portfolio assessments, and a news bulletin board celebrating different forms of accomplishments. These building-wide efforts were complemented by classroom discussions and celebrations that also focused on more than academic success. Students were acknowledged for their achievements in cub scouts, art classes, or just by being a good school citizen. A small group of teachers started singing telegrams and other formal ways to support each other's accomplishments as colleagues. In addition, the principal made it a priority to acknowledge the hard work of staff members.

Susan Inman states *“traditional measures of academic success are positively affected by recognizing all forms of success.”* CASS consistently makes AYP status. Additionally, 69% of third grade students met or exceeded reading standards (05-06) and 71% of third grade students met or exceeded mathematics standards (05-06).

In order to *“build community for all students and staff,”* a second team worked to ensure that all students participated in morning meetings and cross grade level opportunities. Teachers felt that taking time to build community in this way allows for fewer interruptions throughout the school day resulting in a net gain of precious time. The team

also started All School Meetings on a regular basis. During “All School” the entire school community gathers and shares in an activity. These initiatives help make a large school feel and act like a small, intimate learning environment for all.

A third team with the goal to “*create mentoring opportunities for staff and students*” supported an Aspirations Advocate mentoring program involving community members as mentors to students needing additional attention. In addition, classes adopted buddy classes. These classes work together weekly. Another action this team achieved was developing a new teacher mentoring program. Each month new teachers have an opportunity to meet with a different staff member just to chat and learn about upcoming school events. The staff mentoring program quickly allowed new staff members to form mentoring relationships with veteran teachers.

Results

In addition to the student academic success reported of above, the most recent My Voice© staff survey indicates:

- 62% of staff said they feel valued for their unique skills and talents. (12% increase)
- 65% of staff said they feel their opinion is valued at school. (22% increase)
- 68% of staff said they feel comfortable eating in the teacher’s room. (38% increase)

Change takes time, commitment, and dedicated school leaders. Captain Albert Stevens School has been able to realize its original vision of a dynamic, student-centered learning environment.

Sustaining this new culture now involves:

- An opening of school in-service that introduces new staff to the aspiration goals.
- The Aspirations Leadership team planning and delivering staff development.
- Veteran staff continually rethinking the aspirations framework during monthly staff meetings, staff memos, and building goal setting.
- Teacher goal setting which includes an aspirations related goal.
- Each year, the Aspirations Leadership Team adding new members to allow all staff an opportunity to have voice in the process.

School Profile

Principal:	Susan Inman		
Number of Students:	255		
Free and Reduced Lunch:	44%		
Web-site:	www.sad34.net		
Aspirations Team:	Jackie Curtis	Page Dilts	Shirely Kelley
	Margaret Gallagher	Carol McClure	Dana Southworth
	Wendy Krueger	Daleene Gray	Cindi Herbig