



A Solid Foundation: Supportive Contexts for Early Literacy Programs in Maine Schools

**Maine Department of Education
Center for Inquiry on Literacy**



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A SOLID FOUNDATION: Supportive Contexts for Early Literacy Programs in Maine Schools

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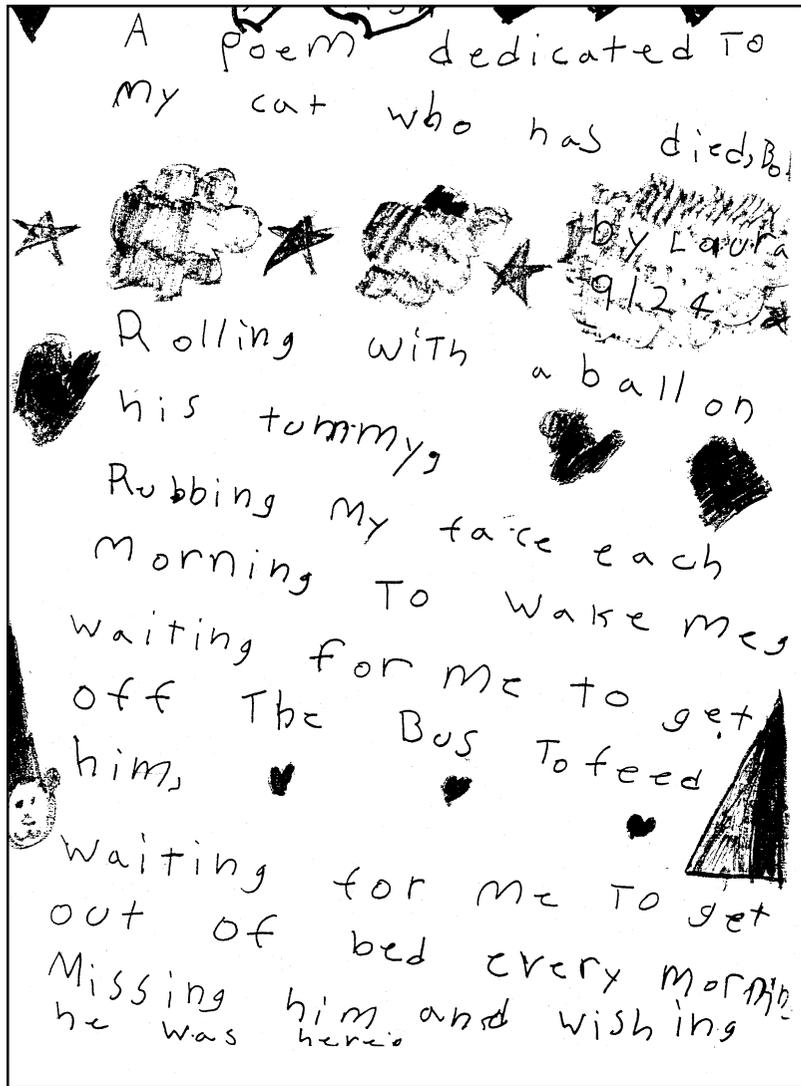


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Poetry

— Grade 1-2 multi-age
classroom



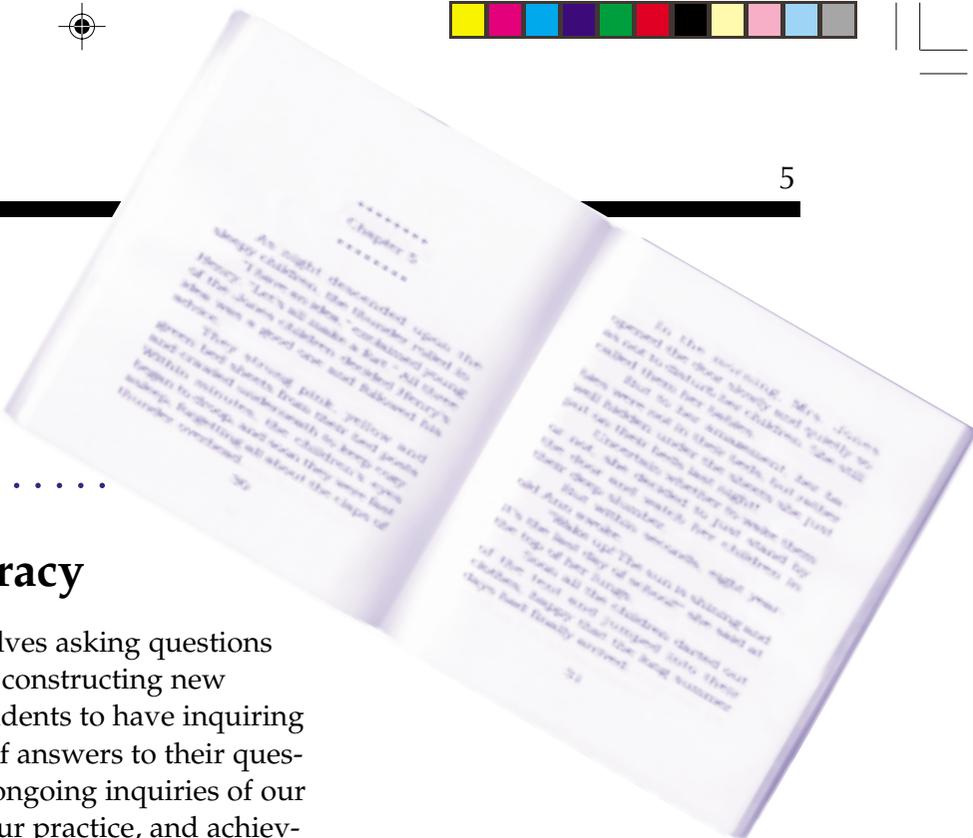


Preface

Center for Inquiry on Literacy

Inquiry, to which Saul Alinsky alludes, involves asking questions and in the process of searching for answers, constructing new learning. As teachers, we encourage our students to have inquiring minds, to investigate their world in search of answers to their questions. As teachers, we should also conduct ongoing inquiries of our own to ensure we are learning, improving our practice, and achieving a positive impact on children's education. The Maine Department of Education envisions that the Center for Inquiry on Literacy will provide practitioners with a structure to help support such professional inquiry.

Impetus for the creation of a Center for Inquiry on Literacy came from a couple of key developments during the past two years. First, in preparation for implementing the *Learning Results* legislation, the Assessment Design Team report of February 1997 suggested that "the State take a leadership role in developing a statewide inventory and assessment of beginning reading." Second, in 1998, the National Research Council commissioned its own inquiry regarding the effectiveness of interventions for children at risk of having problems learning to read. Results of this inquiry were compiled in a report entitled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, Eds., 1998). As the report's authors note, the inquiry came in response to the recognition that while "most children learn to read, many do not read well enough to ensure under-



"Some say it is not coincidence that the question mark is an inverted plow; breaking up the hard soil of old beliefs and preparing for new growth."

(Saul Alinsky)



“We can begin inquiry now on what kinds of studies teachers, individually or in small groups, might conduct to illuminate details of the learning process, to become more sophisticated about their particular students, and to become more capable of demonstrating the relevance of learning to the individual child. We have the chance, if we will but seize it, of freeing the teacher to be the diagnostician, the stalker of meaning, and the constant learner we have always claimed he was or should be.”

(Schaefer, 1967, p. 57)

standing and meet the demands of an increasingly competitive economy” (Snow, et al., 1998, p.1).

The results of the National Research Council’s study come at an opportune time. School reform efforts, such as the implementation of *Learning Results* legislation, have raised expectations for what readers should know and be able to do. Similarly, public awareness of the critical role of reading proficiency is growing. Research findings related to reading processes, skills, strategies, instruction, assessment, and learning environments offer a foundation for “dialogue and planning to bring all students to high levels of literacy” (Braunger and Lewis, 1998, p.1). The Center for Inquiry on Literacy seeks to provide a vehicle for this kind of sustained and reflective examination of literacy practices in Maine.

Commissioner’s Charge

The Center’s work began in September of 1998 when Commissioner of Education, J. Duke Albanese, charged a broad-based “Early Literacy Work Group” to begin examining effective early literacy practices occurring in Maine schools. The charge was further refined to focus on schools whose fourth grade Maine Educational Assessment (MEA) scores in reading not only demonstrated successful achievement, but also either met or exceeded predicted score ranges. To gather data from such schools, the Early Literacy Work Group chose a two-tier approach for its examination: first, it surveyed a large group of identified schools, then—following an initial review of the survey responses—brought a smaller group of representative schools together for a daylong conference, where the representative schools discussed in detail their practices and histories of making effective changes in their early literacy programs. *A Solid Foundation* is based on the Early Literacy Work Group’s analysis of the survey data and the extensive conversations from the conference. In responding to the Commissioner’s charge, this report is intended to be a starting point in further investigations and the first in a series of reports undertaken by the Department of Education’s Center for Inquiry on Literacy.

An Invitation to Join the Dialogue

Elementary schools in the State of Maine are concerned about literacy. Fourth grade MEA data in reading, a core literacy indicator, show considerable variation in student achievement among schools and within the groups of students at particular schools. While there is cause for celebration that Maine’s fourth graders achieve at or near the top in the reading and the writing portions of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), this achievement should not give rise to complacency. These same NAEP results, upon closer examination, also reveal that one out of four Maine students has not acquired a level of literacy that will support the kind of on-going, independent learning that is increasingly demanded in the Information Age. Since the *Learning Results* hold out the vision of significant achievement for all students, it is imperative for us to examine these achievement disparities to better understand how schools can improve student performance.

This report extends an invitation to dialogue, not only about the preliminary findings from the Early Literacy Work Group’s investigation, but about the many and varied challenges those concerned with literacy face. A wide range of people must work together in order to ensure that all children will become fully literate, including parents, early childhood caregivers, teachers, administrators, school board members, teacher preparation institutions, and legislators. Our invitation recognizes that in many cases we will be building on successful practices that need reinforcement and encouragement rather than implementing major changes. The strength of Maine

“Although children have been taught to read for many centuries, only in this century – and until recently only in some countries – has there been widespread expectation that literacy skills be universal... Today, in the United States, we expect 100 percent of the population to be literate. Furthermore, the definition of full-fledged literacy has shifted over the last century with increased technology, with the development of communication over distances, and with the proliferation of large-scale economic enterprises..... The demands are far greater than those placed on the vast majority of literate individuals schooled a quarter-century ago.”

(National Research Council Report, 1998)



students' performance on national tests, as well as on State measures, is a tribute to the many dedicated and skillful teachers in our schools and to the parents who support their children's efforts to become readers. Nevertheless, we cannot overlook the unevenness of achievement that various data sources reveal. Unless dramatic steps are taken, children who are hesitant readers by the end of the third grade will in all likelihood fall further behind in reading and in other subjects where effective literacy skills support continued achievement.

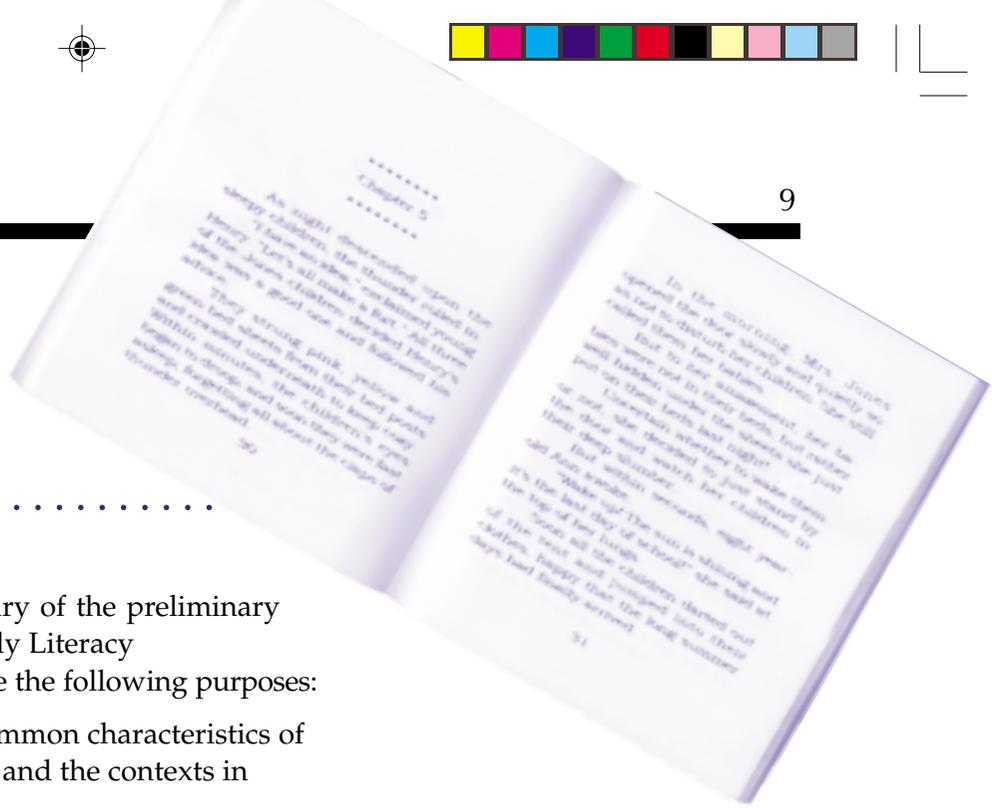
The findings of this report offer hope to all schools. The schools reflected in the data range from large to small, represent all geographic areas in Maine, and have differing per pupil expenditures and amounts of instructional materials available to them. The persistence, enthusiasm, dedication and skill of the teachers and administrators who serve in these schools, and others like them in the State, show what can be accomplished. As we examine literacy in Maine's schools, we should applaud their efforts. Continued improvement will be based on the same fundamental strategy that has led to Maine's success to date: gradually building teachers' capacities to understand their students' needs and building supportive contexts for improved practice in every Maine school.

: *Creative writing*

: — *Grade 2*

I hope it is going to snow soon. I will make a snow man and I will make a snowball with my brother and friend.





Introduction

A *Solid Foundation* provides a summary of the preliminary investigations conducted by the Early Literacy Workgroup, and is designed to serve the following purposes:

- Articulate a set of inter-related, common characteristics of successful early literacy programs and the contexts in which they exist;
- Extend to schools an invitation to dialogue about effective literacy practices and supportive school and community contexts;
- Provide schools a place to begin examining their own practices, and a recursive model for doing so; and
- Inform the Center for Inquiry’s continued examination of literacy practices in Maine.

The sequence of presentation in the report follows the order in which the Early Literacy Work Group conducted its investigation:

- A summary of the research design used to gather data;
- An examination of common characteristics revealed in the analysis of the data, including a description of a recursive model for effecting change; and
- A set of preliminary conclusions, implications, and questions for further dialogue in local school districts among professional development service providers, as well as policy makers.

Appendices include a bibliography of references, a guide to dialogue, the survey used in the investigation, and literacy resources.

Research Design

Following the Commissioner of Education's charge to gather state-wide data regarding the current status of early literacy in Maine, a geographically diverse group—representing literacy practitioners from the public schools and scholars from University of Maine campuses—was assembled. In September of 1998 this Early Literacy Work Group began meeting to identify the goals of the early literacy project. Based on the charge from the Commissioner, it was determined that the project's goals would be: to gather data on exemplary literacy programs across the State and to determine the common characteristics that contribute to their success. For the purposes of the project, "early literacy" was defined as literacy in kindergarten through grade three.

The Work Group developed an initial research design to gather and analyze data on common practices in schools that have demonstrated successful student achievement in the area of literacy. To ensure that the design included schools in all socio-economic categories, the Work Group also collaborated with the Center for Educational Policy, Applied Research and Evaluation (CEPARE) at the University of Southern Maine to refine the research design to include a "value added" component.



Student Achievement Data Were Used to Identify Schools

The first step in the process was to use fourth grade Maine Educational Assessment (MEA) scores in reading to identify schools that would be candidates for study. Then, to achieve the value added goal, CEPARE used a selection process that had been developed for an earlier study of “high performing schools.” This process relies on three criteria:

- A school-level, three-year average MEA reading score one-half standard deviation or more above the state average;
- 75% or more of the students scoring at Basic or above in reading; and
- A school-level, three-year average z-score of 0.5 or greater above the predicted score on the MEA. [Technical Report from the Work Group on Early Literacy, *Kopp, 1999.*]

These criteria were applied in sequential order to state 4th grade MEA reading scores to identify two groups of schools: those scoring in an “above-average” range using the high-performing schools calculation; and those scoring in an “average” range using the high-performing schools calculation. Since 4th grade reading scores are not applicable for schools containing only grades K-3, Title I Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) results were also used to identify additional schools that have demonstrated consistent improvement in reading achievement in grades K-3. The above process yielded 151 schools to be surveyed.

A Survey of Literacy Programs Provided a Breadth of Information

The Work Group surveyed principals or literacy specialists in the 151 schools to gather extensive data on early literacy practices, and to identify a smaller set of schools for more in-depth study. Based on a review by the Work Group of the most recent literature regarding literacy, the survey was developed with several components in mind: instruction, assessment, professional development, reading interventions, and student and staff characteristics. Of the 151 surveys that were sent, 78 surveys were returned, a return rate of approximately 52%. (See Appendix C for a copy of the survey.)



A Set of Representative Schools Was Identified for Further Study

From the group of schools who returned surveys, the Work Group identified a smaller group of schools for further study—all of which scored in the “above average” range in the high-performing schools calculation or demonstrated consistently strong improvement using the AYP formula. It is important to note that one goal in selecting schools for further study was to ensure that the group was representative of many types of schools and all regions in Maine. Thus, the 14 schools chosen for further study were selected from a geographically diverse pool of schools with populations ranging from 24 to over 800 students, with special education populations ranging from 9% to 35%, and with free and reduced lunch populations ranging from 7% to 97%. Of the 14 schools invited, 11 accepted the invitation and attended the conference.

The purpose in studying this smaller sample of schools was to gain detailed descriptions of their literacy programs and the contexts in which they exist. Representatives from each of the eleven schools were assembled for a daylong conference in Bar Harbor. The purpose of the conference was to provide teachers, literacy specialists, and principals in the schools an opportunity to tell their stories of success. Members of the Work Group participated as either group facilitators or note-takers so that the rich detail of each school’s story could be drawn out and captured. In follow-up analysis by the Work Group, several distinguishing common characteristics of the high performing schools were identified, and they form the heart of this report.

A Foundation for Further Dialogue and Inquiry

The findings of this study are not intended to represent a list of practices that, if implemented, would automatically result in increased early literacy achievement in any given school. Nor did the research project probe more deeply into the classroom practices identified in the data, or contrast practices in high-performing with those in lower performing schools. Rather, it was intended to paint a broad-brush picture of underlying characteristics present in schools with strong literacy achievement. Further research on effective early literacy programs will be the subject of an in-depth follow-up research project to be conducted by the Department's Center for Inquiry on Literacy.

The results of this study do suggest that common characteristics can be found in schools with exemplary achievement in reading in the early grades. The characteristics themselves, however, reveal just as much about the professional contexts in which effective programs have flourished, and thus connect with the effective schools and systemic change research conducted over the past three decades (Bossert, 1985, Edmonds, 1979, Fullen et al, 1981, House, 1981, Senge, 1990). *A Solid Foundation*, and the body of research on the organizational contexts of schools, make it clear that creating the conditions for success in literacy involves a set of inter-related factors; therefore,



