

# ***“We’re From the State and We’re Here to Help”***

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State-Level Innovations in Support of High School  
Improvement

By Edmund T. Hamann and Brett Lane



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***“States are engaged in complex school reform in order to improve the academic achievement of students in all schools. Improving student achievement, however, requires changing the behavior of teachers. The problem presented by complex school reform, then, is the problem of how the [SEA] can bring about specified changes in the practice of a large number of practitioners over whom it has little, if any, direct control and to whom it has no proximity.”***

***—Susan Follett Lusi***

***The Role of State Departments of Education in  
Complex School Reform (1997, p. 10)***

## CASE DESCRIPTION

This case describes the ongoing efforts (circa 2002) of the Maine Department of Education to encourage high school's improvement through state-level actions. Three intertwined strategies have added value to the individual schools' improvement efforts. These are (1) the drafting of a statewide reform framework called *Promising Futures* (Maine Commission on Secondary Education, 1998), (2) the creation of a new and unorthodox institutional formation called the Center for Inquiry in Secondary Education (CISE) at the state department, and (3) the success at substantially adapting the federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program by intertwining it with *Promising Futures* and restricting it to high schools. The success so far of these strategies has depended on a fourth element: the strategies' personalized implementation by largely autonomous, highly credible, culturally savvy, devoted, and suitably experienced education leaders. All four of these elements are described here with a conscious intent of positioning readers to consider the viability of these ideas for state education agency (SEA) action and consequent high school improvement elsewhere.

## INTRODUCTION

As any good Maine educator knows, the idea in the title of this paper, that “we’re from the state and we’re here to help” is an oxymoron. In a part of the United States that defiantly prides itself on perpetuating traditions like town meetings and other versions of direct or almost-direct democracy, being told what to do by someone else, particularly by someone pulling rank, is viewed skeptically--to put it mildly (Ruff, Smith, & Miller, 2000). Yet on school visit after school visit, we heard a staffer of the Center for Inquiry on Secondary Education (CISE), which is centrally involved with Maine's high school improvement effort, repeat this phrase. Was he being naïve or self-defeating? To the contrary, he was proving his credentials as an insider. Said with the right mix of sarcasm and twinkle in the eye, this line was a way of marking familiarity with local cultural convention. Something akin to “I know that you think this proposition is absurd. I think it is often absurd too, because I recognize that too often your sensibility seems to be cavalierly overlooked by state bureaucrats. So I'll say it, we'll laugh, and then we'll get down to business.”

The purpose of this paper is to describe and discuss three intertwined strategies for state education agencies (SEAs) to incubate high school change, with Maine serving as the illustrative case study. However, we consciously highlight this personal touch, this success at being credible, because without that dynamic the other strategies would likely founder. We know from research that the interpersonal processes that accompany and support new structures are integral to ensuring successful and enduring change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Lieberman, 1995; Rust & Freidus, 2001). We know that successful school reform depends on collaboration, collaboration among professionals at a school and, often, external collaboration as well (Hargreaves, 1996). We know how badly school reform can turn out if a collaborative spirit is not successfully incubated (Muncey & McQuillan, 1996; McQuillan, 1998; McCallister 2001).

Maine's successful efforts at state-supported high school change are crucially enabled by the orientations, interactive skills, vision, and energy of the small group of professional educators who have led the initiative. Though not infallible, these leaders instinctively understand that high school reform requires learning—both their own learning and learning on the part of school-based personnel. As Sarason (1990) and Cohen & Barnes (1993) have noted, recognition of the need for adult learning as an integral component of school reform unfortunately is often lacking.

The Maine leaders have instinctively pursued a *constructivist* strategy in their attempts to engage school personnel in learning (though neither of the two most engaged state officials would have used that term until Harvard's Tony Wagner suggested it to them in January 2002 as part of an inquiry visit supporting the Gates Foundation's investigation of whether to offer additional support for Maine's efforts). According to our understanding of constructivist educational theory—an understanding largely derived from Erickson (1987), Moll (1997), Phillips (1999), and Vygotsky (1978)—for a teacher, or in this case a state-based change agent, to support successful guided learning on the part of the student (in this case the school-based educator), the learner must view both the teacher and the lesson as credible.<sup>1</sup> Referencing again the title of our paper, the state-based change agents have succeeded, to a large degree, at being credible to the personnel in the Maine high schools attempting change. Their individual credibility, however, has only been part of the equation. The 'curriculum' they have been promoting (i.e., *Promising Futures*) and the structures within which they have been operating (i.e., CISE) have both been deemed sufficiently credible by school-based teachers and administrators. The resources of the Comprehensive School Reform

Demonstration (CSRSD) program have provided the third structural leg upon which the high school reform efforts have depended.

## RESEARCH AS COLLECTIVE PRAXIS: WHY WE CAN TELL THIS STORY

Before more fully explicating how Maine has succeeded and on what grounds we view it as successful, let us try to assert our own credibility as tellers of this story. In 1998, David Ruff intervened in Maine's state-level strategizing about high school reform in a way that would ultimately lead to both of us (the two authors of this report) becoming involved in Maine's efforts as well. Ruff was and is the Director of School Reform at the Southern Maine Partnership, and he was on the Maine Commission on Secondary Education, which drafted *Promising Futures*. In 1998, Ruff successfully petitioned state officials to ask the U.S. Department of Education for several waivers regarding the way in which Maine would use its modest allocation from the new federal CSRSD program.<sup>ii</sup> Maine received those waivers allowing it to use all of its CSRSD allocation at the high school level, to not have to restrict portions of its allocations to schoolwide Title I schools (which typically are elementary schools), and to attach elements of *Promising Futures* as program requirements for schools applying for CSRSD support.

This tie-in between *Promising Futures* and CSRSD was the impetus for our involvement with Maine's high school reform efforts. We (Lane and Hamann) both work for the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory (a.k.a., the LAB) at The Education Alliance at Brown University. As applied researchers working under the parameters of a federal regional educational laboratory (REL) contract, we are charged with working with schools, school districts, and states in support of school improvement. In 1998, concurrent with the disbursement of CSRSD monies to the states, each of the RELs also received funding to support and study CSRSD implementation. By the autumn of 1999, our organization had supported CSRSD roll-out efforts in several states and islands in our region and had begun convening state CSRSD coordinators in quarterly meetings. However, the LAB had not yet pursued the charge to study CSRSD implementation.

In January 2000, the lead author (Hamann) began an ethnographic comparative study of three groups of Maine high schools—those that were receiving CSRSD funds, those that had unsuccessfully applied for CSRSD funds, and those that had indicated an interest in *Promising Futures* but had not applied for CSRSD support. That work involved 29 days worth of site visits to 10 high schools and sustained interaction with CISE staff in several capacities (e.g., accompaniment on site visits, co-presentations in Washington DC, content support for two professional development workshops, and

multiple e-mail and telephone interactions). It also led to the publication of *CSRD Roll-out in Maine: Lessons from a Statewide Case Study* (Hamann, Lane, & Hudak, 2001).

During the 1999-2000 school year, the second author of this paper (Lane), led an effort to formatively evaluate Maine's statewide first-year effort to implement CSRD. This work complemented and overlapped with Hamann's work. The LAB offered this complementary service to four small states in our region (Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont) in recognition of the fact that federal restrictions required that 95% of a state's CSRD allocation had to be passed along to schools. In Maine's case, the fiscal year 1999 CSRD allocation totaled only \$587,575, leaving a little less than \$30,000 for state coordination of the initiative (ostensibly to cover salary and benefits, grant solicitation and review costs, and evaluation). The LAB's *Year One Maine CSRD Evaluation* (Lane and Hamann 2000) was based on review of each CSRD school's end-of-the-year grant-implementation portfolio presentation as well as on data from site visits. It was completed in the fall of 2000 and made public on our Web site, with the permission of the Maine Department of Education, in the spring of 2001.<sup>iii</sup>

The new REL contract that was approved in December 2000 did not identify any specific CSRD allocation.<sup>iv</sup> Maine, meanwhile, had received a larger CSRD allocation, so it contracted with the LAB's parent organization, The Education Alliance at Brown University, for a year two evaluation. During the 2000-2001 school year, both authors of this paper again accompanied CISE staff from the Maine Department of Education on school site visits to all 11 CSRD high schools. We again provided content support for a CISE-sponsored workshop for the whole CSRD cohort, and again assisted with review of each school's grant implementation portfolio. This evaluation work also occasioned lengthy conversations between us and CISE staff during car rides to schools and in restaurants and hotel lobbies when school visits required overnight stays, as they often did. In 2001-2002, both of us again participated in formative evaluations of Maine's CSRD effort (this time including a new cohort of 11 more high schools, as well as the original 11).<sup>v</sup> The lead author has also been able to obtain resources for additional data collection and analysis by directing toward Maine's case some of The Education Alliance's federally funded applied research that examines student-centered learning.

The visits, the conversations, the evaluations, and the multiple exchanges of phone calls and e-mails allowed us to develop great familiarity with Maine's recent attempts at high school change. These

experiences also ground our claim that our research and evaluation work in Maine fits within a “research as collective praxis” framework. According to Adams et al. (2001, p. 61),

Core assumptions of the “research as collective praxis” model are that (a) researchers acknowledge and act upon their political commitments and (b) they do so in the context of theorizing and practice (i.e., praxis) with both professionals and non-professionals, such as students and community members (Fine, 1989; Gitlin, et al., 1992; Reinharz, 1984; Vio Brossi & de Wit, 1981). In this way, the line between “researcher” and “policymaker” or “practitioner” becomes blurred as those who identify (or are typified) primarily as playing one of these roles in fact play both. Not only do policymakers, administrators, teachers, students, and community members participate in research, but “researchers” become active participants in various settings, working with others to understand and change schools and society.

Carrying out this work with CISE staff, we have wondered sometimes about which possessive pronouns to use to describe our efforts, alternating between ‘theirs’, ‘yours’, and ‘ours’. At least some of the time, both CISE and Brown-based staff (i.e., us) discuss the roll-out of CSRD/*Promising Futures* as if it is our shared enterprise. We explicitly acknowledge this blurring of role and ownership so readers can consider when and how we as authors might be biased, but also to have them appreciate our proximity to the case and its key actors. Toma (2000) suggests that being an interested party can be an important asset for conducting qualitative inquiry because it can help the interaction with research subjects to become more transactional and thus more substantive and intimate.

Politically, both of us (Hamann and Lane) subscribe to the vision of equity-oriented, personalized secondary school instruction that is embodied in *Promising Futures*, and we seek to contribute to *Promising Futures*’ successful implementation as a vehicle for improving students’ school experiences and achievement. Though this paper has been authored just by the two of us, CISE staff reviewed it and, consistent with the research as collective praxis framework, it encompasses many of their understandings as well as our own. Two theorists of qualitative educational research, Lincoln and Guba, call this “member-checking” and go on to note it as “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (1985, p. 314).

Further blurring the researcher/policymaker/practitioner lines, this paper is intentionally framed within the nascent field of sociocultural studies of educational policy formation and appropriation (Sutton & Levinson, 2001). As such, we believe that a distinction between policy and practice is often a misleading heuristic. Clearly the practice of adapting federal CSRD policy—perhaps ‘co-

opting' is a more apt term—has changed the policy environment within which Maine high school reform moves forward. In other words, policy, defined as the articulation of a problem diagnosis and related strategy of response, is asserted not just from the top and not just at the beginning. Our close consultative relationships with CISE staff—indeed our friendship—plus our frequent presence as they acted, positioned us well to observe and record the praxis of an SEA attempting to support school improvement.

As an additional methodological point, Levinson and Sutton (2001, p. 16) assert that one contribution (among many) that socioculturally oriented policy researchers can make is to challenge fundamental assumptions behind specific policies. In this instance, we think the assumptions this study challenges are federal assumptions and not so much assumptions in play at CISE or in Maine schools (though it is useful to let Maine educators know how different their implementation of CSRD has been from implementation in other jurisdictions). We hope, in the following pages, to give readers a sense of how SEA staff can be involved in schools as change agents and can be policy creators in their role as policy intermediaries. In our review of the literature, we did not often encounter an expectation that intermediaries can play this role, nor that in doing so, they can substantially add to the viability of the endeavor.

As a final methodological frame, we want to locate our work within McLaughlin's (1987) third generation of policy implementation studies. Specifically, we intend this work to blend the features of micro and macro analyses, appreciating both the situated activity of particular individuals as well as the encompassing parameters of the federal CSRD and state-level *Promising Futures* policy frameworks. We also borrow McLaughlin's emphasis on aligning the implementation measures within the timeframe of the program(s) being studied. Specifically, we concur that a summative emphasis on student outcomes would largely be premature and that the more pertinent questions at this stage concern process indicators—in McLaughlin's words, "the extent to which necessary resources are available to support the implementation, whether there is evidence of good-faith efforts to learn new routines, or indication of commitment and support within the implementing system for policy strategies and goals" (p. 176).

## FRAMING THE QUESTION

For almost 20 years, if not longer, high schools have been attracting substantial reform-oriented attention (e.g., Boyer 1983; Lightfoot, 1983; Sizer, 1983, 1984). However, despite that attention, high schools have not systematically and enduringly reformed into successful learning environments

for most of their students. The point here is not to sweepingly label high schools as “good” or “bad,” but rather to suggest that they have not, in aggregate, improved (as evidenced by the flatness of high school students’ NAEP achievement scores [Campbell, Hombo, & Mazzeo, 2000]). The explanations for this relative failure are no doubt multiple, but two key and intertwined explanations are (1) the traditional resistance of high schools to reform (Sarason, 1990; Muncey & McQuillan, 1996; McQuillan, 1998; Reeder, 1999; Lee, 2001) and (2) the typical reliance on key personnel for those reforms that do succeed (Fink, 2000). In other words, high schools are hard to change but, even when they are purposefully changed, too often the change is temporary, disappearing when a key teacher retires, a principal moves, or a superintendent is fired. Greenman (1994, p. 4) describes a related hazard: “Change also is sabotaged successfully by inadvertently imposing innovative concepts on archaic structures. The innovations often are misunderstood, resisted, and ultimately deemed ineffective, especially when evaluated by inappropriate criteria.”

Effective innovations disappear or are co-opted without changes in the larger educational structure (e.g., at the district and state levels, in professional development, teacher education, and so on [Lusi, 1997; Fink, 2000]). Thinking about these conundrums using an ecological metaphor, if the ecosystem around a reforming high school does not also change, then that high school and the larger environment are in disequilibrium, putting pressure on both to return to balance. Of course, as the substantially smaller entity, the high school rather than the larger environment does much more of the changing—or we should say changing back—in the return to equilibrium.

Following this logic, sustainable high school improvement requires adaptations away from the school site as well as in the school’s classrooms (i.e., at the school district, the state department of education, and even federal levels). Those different tiers also need to adapt the ways in which they interact.

Lusi (1997, p. 6) defines two essential components of viable systemic school reform:

- It “strives to reform the education system *as a system*” (italics in original). That means education systems’ component policies need to be coherent across the system.
- Systemic reform explicitly strives to support school-site efforts at redesigning teaching and learning in support of all students. Promulgation of ‘top-down’ and additive mandates is insufficient. Schools and districts must be supported and activated to transform teaching and learning as part of a coherent redesign.

### THREE ELEMENTS: TEMPLATE, STRUCTURE, RESOURCES

In the late 1990s, with the explicit support of Maine's Commissioner of Education, J. Duke Albanese, Maine erected three structural components, which have undergirded the subsequent state-level efforts to improve high schools statewide. These three components are the drafting and dissemination of *Promising Futures*, the creation of the Center for Inquiry in Secondary Education (CISE), and the acquisition of waivers to concentrate CSRD at the high school level.

#### Promising Futures

Chronologically, the drafting of *Promising Futures: A Call to Improve Learning for Maine's Secondary Students* was the first of the three state-supported/state-initiated structural changes that have increased the likelihood of high school improvement in Maine. In 1997, Maine's Commissioner of Education charged 26 members of the ad hoc Maine Commission on Secondary Education with drafting a new vision for what high schools in Maine should look like. The commission described that vision and pointed to ways in which it could be realized by articulating several core principles and a longer list of core practices. The commission, with support from a few consultants (notably several of our colleagues at The Education Alliance and Ted and Nancy Sizer),<sup>vi</sup> met its charge when *Promising Futures* was formally made public in September 1998 as a voluntary framework for schools to enact. (The fact that implementation of *Promising Futures* was to be voluntary rather than prescribed gives indication of both Maine's tradition of resistance to mandates and of the state's pragmatic awareness of how little mandating *Promising Futures* would accomplish.)

*Promising Futures*, of course, was not produced in a vacuum. Rather, it was a response to a data-based problem diagnosis. Specifically, legislators had noted that at the fourth-grade level Maine's NAEP scores were well ahead of national averages (despite Maine's middle rank in educational funding)<sup>vii</sup> and that at the eighth-grade level Maine remained above national averages (though not by as big a margin). However, Maine scores at the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade level only matched the rest of the country. In other words, in the latter parts of their public education Maine students lost ground in relation to their peers nationwide. This rationalized a focus on changes at the secondary level.

If NAEP data suggested where Maine should focus energies, the 'hows'—notably the emphasis on personalization—were a product of the learning of multiple members on the commission, as well as the commission's consultants. Commission co-chair, Pam Fisher, had been a highly successful principal at Noble High School in Maine immediately prior to her stint on the commission and she brought with her a favorable impression of the Coalition of Essential Schools (a model that Noble

had embraced). Fisher advocated for giving students voice and choice in their own academic programs as well as in the governance and daily functioning of the school. Two of the core principles embraced in *Promising Futures* as requisite for effective high schooling were:

- Teacher practice which values and builds upon the contributions and needs of the learner
- Equitable and democratic practices

Several of the 15 recommended core practices of *Promising Futures* were also explicit about the importance of shifting the culture of high school to a focus on student-centered learning, including paying overt attention to creating ways for students to articulate their goals, wants, and aspirations.<sup>viii</sup> These include:

- **Core Practice 2:** Every teacher tailors learning experiences to the learner’s needs, interests, and future goals.
- **Core Practice 5:** Every student makes informed choices about education and participation in school life and takes responsibility for the consequences of those choices.
- **Core Practice 6:** Every student employs a personal learning plan to target individual as well as common learning goals and to specify learning activities that will lead to the attainment of those goals.
- **Core Practice 9:** Students and teachers belong to teams that provide each student with continuous personal and academic attention and a supportive environment for learning and growth.
- **Core Practice 11:** Every teacher has sufficient time and resources to learn, to plan, and to confer with individual students, colleagues, and families.
- **Core Practice 14:** Staff, students, and parents are involved democratically in significant decisions affecting student learning.

If the above principles and practices illustrate *Promising Futures*’ emphasis on promoting personalized learning, they are nonetheless still incomplete in terms of conveying Maine’s full strategy for high school change. *Promising Futures* also emphasized positioning all students to meet high standards. How this goal was achieved could vary, but the focus was non-negotiable. Core Practice #7 notes the importance of standards, as well as the overt alignment of curriculum and assessment with those standards: “Every teacher makes learning standards, activities, and assessment procedures known to students and parents and assures the coherence among them.”

To sidestep some of the hazards of ‘reform by addition’ (Sizer, 1983)—the hazard of promoting new activities for teachers and administrators without freeing up time and resources by discontinuing old ones—*Promising Futures* also includes a two-page list of typical high school practices that are to be discontinued. Core Practice #10 summarizes the logic of this list of outgoing practices: “Learning governs the allocation of time, space, facilities, and services.”

In short, *Promising Futures* offers a blueprint for comprehensive school change and improvement at the high school level. However, on its own, it provides none of the external supports or resources that are necessary for leveraging such a change in school culture and practice. Gordon Donaldson, who co-chaired the commission that drafted *Promising Futures*, wrote, “[T]he commission agreed on the importance of an overriding strategy for whole school change; no single core practice could make a significant difference alone, and they were embedded in one another and needed to be undertaken as a whole” (2000, p. 103). What the commission did not agree on, nor could it because it could not allocate resources, was how to convert *Promising Futures* from a delineation of what ‘ought to be’ to a program of action. When *Promising Futures* was published, few resources were committed for its implementation and, indeed, few were available. Moreover, the penchant in Maine to reject mandates because they were mandates still loomed. Responding to these realities, the authors of *Promising Futures* explained, “This document, therefore, is not a set of mandates or requirements. It is, instead, an invitation to understand the need for change and a call to take up the challenge of school improvement” (1998, p. 5). Two additional structures were soon put into place to make the enactment of *Promising Futures* more viable.

### **Center for Inquiry in Secondary Education (CISE)**

As the major follow-up to the drafting of *Promising Futures*, the state supported the creation of CISE in 1998 as a structurally unorthodox and fully supported arm of the Maine Department of Education. Far from a large program, CISE has never had more than six staff members, including support staff. Nonetheless, it has pursued an ambitious charge: to promote *Promising Futures* through the vehicles of summer retreats and other professional development efforts and through CSRD as described in the next section. Most of CISE’s staff (current and past) served on the Maine Commission on Secondary Education, which drafted *Promising Futures*.<sup>ix</sup>

The Maine education commissioner’s design for CISE endowed it with three key assets: access, autonomy, and legitimacy. Even as CISE personnel have changed over, the commissioner has always made sure that he is in routine contact with at least one CISE staffer, if not several. This fact has not

been lost to appreciative CISE staff members. One CISE staffer said of the commissioner, “I’ve worked with a lot of people across the country, big names, but never for anyone I respect this much.” This sense of access, and its related implication that the commissioner particularly values CISE’s work, has been reciprocated by CISE staff members’ willingness to go above and beyond the workload of a typical SEA job.

Because of this favorable access, the commissioner agreed to nearly double CISE’s funding in 2001 and gave the assurance that the roll-out of CSRSD would have sufficient state-level administrative support because of the infusion of non-federal monies to CISE. (Recall that the federal CSRSD funding available at the state level was no more than 5%, which meant less than \$30,000 in the first two years of CSRSD and less than \$60,000 in 2001-2002.)

Despite this proximity to the commissioner, CISE has been able to function with substantial autonomy, in turn allowing non-bureaucratic responsiveness to the schools (usually CSRSD schools) that have been most aggressively pursuing *Promising Futures*. One illustration of this autonomy comes from the Maine CSRSD coordinator, a CISE staff member (CSRSD is administered through CISE). Faced with the challenge of developing a strategy to sufficiently document CSRSD schools’ reform implementation, the coordinator determined that schools could use school portfolios to first record and then demonstrate the progress of their implementation. She then turned to educators at the first cohort of CSRSD high schools for feedback on the logistics of how to enact this requirement. This was a decision with substantial input, but no mind-numbing, tedious approval process. Though the creation process was laborious, the portfolios have compelled some reform implementation teams to reflect upon their progress to date and to plan appropriate next steps. At some schools they have also proved a useful archive, helpful for orienting new staff (Hamann, Lane, & Johnson, 2001).

The most important asset of CISE, however, has been a strategic hiring plan to staff the center. Because of this, CISE has recruited personnel capable of building and maintaining legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the school counterparts with whom they work. As one CISE staffer reflected in reference to several hires, “The commissioner directly recruited and hired recognized, successful change agents.” In other words, the search process for candidates was purposeful rather than open-ended. CISE staff include or formerly included two ex-principals with track records of transforming schools in low-income communities into two of the highest performing high schools in the state. As noted, most key CISE staffers had also served on the Maine Commission on Secondary Education,

which drafted *Promising Futures*. With the exception of support staff, all CISE staff have been educators at successfully transformed Maine schools. These school-change veterans bring a sense of familiarity and sympathy for the challenges facing Maine high schools to all their interactions with school-based personnel. They also bring a capacity to share advice from their previous experiences and examine what worked rather than flat-out mandating what a school should do.

CISE staff's sheer doggedness is the final reason for the apparent site-based credibility that we have observed again and again as we have joined them on school visits. The three CISE staffers who have been most involved with the CSR/D/*Promising Futures* schools that we have studied have been frequent visitors and conscientious communicators with those sites, despite the fact that they are officially part time. Two of these staff members have averaged more than 30 nights away from home per year in the years they have been with CISE. Both have carefully read and re-read various school documents (e.g., grant applications, portfolios, annual plans, etc.) late into the night before school visits so that they know well what the school has proposed and can speak to it with familiarity.

Moreover, because of their busy school-visit schedules, both are well-equipped on any given visit to relate the experiences, challenges, and successful strategies of other *Promising Futures* schools. In other words, CISE staff have gained credibility because of their success as gatherers and disseminators of school stories. In fact, communicating the stories of others has been a key part of the CISE staffers' repertoire on school visits because, as noted in the title and introduction of this paper, top-down directing from the state is viewed dubiously by Maine educators. As story-bearers, CISE staff successfully occupy a collegial intermediary role, gaining authority not from their positions but rather from the salience of what they have to tell. This is a crucial characteristic of viable administration (Corson, 1995). CISE staff have been largely successful at deconstructing the pretentiousness of hierarchy that would otherwise undercut their efforts. They consistently strive to support schools while still understanding that schools will construct their own meaning of *Promising Futures*. In a sense, CISE expects schools to construct their own individual reform as the state supplies parameters and guidance with a loose rather than didactic touch.

### **Linking Promising Futures and CSR/D**

High school reform in Maine has therefore depended upon having a framework for change and a new entity in the Maine Department of Education—CISE—that was expertly staffed. Maine's state-led effort at high school improvement has also rested on a key third support: CSR/D funding that could be offered as a 'carrot' or 'reward' for those high schools willing to embrace *Promising*

*Futures*. This link between CSRD and *Promising Futures* or, more abstractly, between CSRD and a state-level reform initiative is unique within the 53 jurisdictions enacting CSRD. No other SEA has made this dramatic an adaptation to the vision of CSRD that has been promulgated by federal officials.

Thinking back to the origins of CSRD in the late 1990s, one should remember that CSRD was a federal mandate to SEAs to arrange a dispersal of funds to schools that were willing to honor the nine components of CSRD.<sup>x</sup> In low-population states like Maine, with relatively few Title I-eligible students, CSRD potentially posed a logistical challenge, with too little support directed to SEAs. Unlike populous states, like New York, or jurisdictions with high student poverty rates, like Puerto Rico (population and poverty determined total CSRD allocation), the federal guidelines that limited total state-level CSRD expenditure to 5% or less of the annual federal allocation meant in Maine that slightly less than \$30,000 was available to pay for the arrangement of a grant competition, the subsequent management of the program implementation, and the federally required state-level program evaluation.<sup>xi</sup> Just initiating CSRD in Maine included drafting a request for proposals, publicizing the opportunity to schools, and coordinating a team of proposal reviewers. Taking on this logistical challenge only became appealing after Maine had successfully petitioned for a federal waiver to allow it to add parameters to federal CSRD program guidelines.

The waiver allowed Maine to incorporate elements of *Promising Futures* into CSRD and to restrict CSRD eligibility only to high schools. In the autumn of 1998, the Maine Department of Education hired a half-time CSRD coordinator to be affiliated with CISE. The department's choice was a former high school teacher who had spent her entire eight-year career at a member school of the Coalition of Essential Schools working for a principal who had co-chaired the *Promising Futures* development team. The CSRD coordinator was charged with the practical work of marrying the nine federally required CSRD components to Maine's *Promising Futures* framework, drafting a request for proposals (RFP), and encouraging a competitive number of schools to apply. She achieved all of this with input from her CISE colleagues.

The formal linking of CSRD and *Promising Futures* did not occur all at once, nor was the linkage ever a full merger. Consistent with the theoretical premises of Levinson and Sutton (2001), in the act of conversion of *Promising Futures* from a policy document to a program of action explicitly intertwined with CSRD, both *Promising Futures* and CSRD were altered. If obtaining the waiver to focus CSRD awards at the secondary level was Maine's first step toward linking *Promising Futures*

and CSRD, then incorporating *Promising Futures* into the text of the CSRD request for proposals (RFP) that was sent to schools was the second. The text of the “Purpose” section at the beginning of that RFP explains:

The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRSD) program provides funding to the secondary schools having the greatest need to substantially improve student achievement of the Maine Learning Results. CSRSD funds are targeted for secondary schools to help them meet the vision and core recommendations made in the report *Promising Futures* by the Maine Commission on Secondary Education. Schools that receive CSRSD funding will work to implement four core practices, identified in *Promising Futures*, as key to improving student achievement.

Thus, when high schools in Maine applied for CSRSD funding (or, more accurately, when they accepted their CSRSD awards), they were making a commitment to four of the *Promising Futures* core practices.

## **CONSTRUCTIVIST ENGAGEMENT: MAKING STATE STRATEGIES VIABLE THROUGH PERSONALIZATION**

At the heart of Maine’s dubiousness toward ‘top-down’ initiatives is skepticism of formal authority. Functional authority is not regarded with similar suspicion. Formal authority is authority derived from one’s formal position within the bureaucratic hierarchy. Functional authority is authority granted by virtue of demonstrated expertise and understanding.<sup>xii</sup> Functional authority is attained through multiple and overlapping means, and it is a core condition for learning, according to a constructivist theory of learning (Erickson, 1987; Moll, 1997; Phillips, 1999; and Vygotsky, 1978). According to the tenets of constructivist learning, for guided learning to accomplish its formal goal the content of the message and the messenger both must be credible. This section further considers why CISE staff were credible to school-based educators.

Those from CISE who oversaw CSRSD and who had the vast majority of interaction with schools had substantial functional authority that emerged from several sources. Their records as highly competent practitioners were extremely important. Also, their ‘borrowed expertise’—that is, the expertise obtained from learning lessons during discussions with practitioners at one site and carrying that procedural knowledge to practitioners at another site—contributed to their functional authority. To offer a typical but illustrative example, during a six-hour visit to a ‘Cohort II’ (i.e., newly funded) CSRSD school in March 2002, the two visiting CISE staff members referenced practices at five different CSRSD schools that they named and several others that they referred to

anonymously. Mentioning experiences of other CSRD schools (and never naming schools when the reference was negative) was just standard operating procedure.

As part of their 'borrowed expertise,' CISE staff also recounted a repertoire of favorite stories frequently during school visits because of their applicability. One favorite story that CISE staff mentioned during several visits was that of a student who had been part of a small group that came in to help with planning during the summer between the CSRD grant award and the first year of implementation. That student, predicting some student recalcitrance to new ways, had suggested to faculty and administrators that they "don't give up" on the students, that the students would come around to new practices. In recounting this story at other schools, the CISE staffer who most frequently repeated it was proving her familiarity with student skepticism, and she was suggesting that it was okay to both persevere and be patient with students. These are comforting and instructive messages to educators struggling with new reforms and facing skepticism.

CISE staff also became credible to school-based educators through personalization. Epitomizing the personalized nature of her interaction with each school, one CISE staffer proclaimed at the end of a day-and-a-half CSRD school training workshop in May 2000: "You all have my phone number." They did and they were accustomed to calling her or e-mailing her for guidance. Leaders of the CSRD implementation team at one of the funded high schools told us, "She's been a key person. We'll call her and talk for an hour."

The strategy of frequent interaction with personnel from the CSRD schools points to another reason for CISE staffers' success. CISE staff spent enough time with grant implementation leaders at most schools that they became familiar with them and each school's situation. This is an enabling condition for the establishment of credibility. Similar to the understanding often applied to high school students that teachers need to know them well in order for them to learn the intended lessons, adult-guided professional development—or, as in this case, state-guided complex school reform—needs familiarity to succeed. School staff were more willing to learn and enact new ways if the promulgators of the new ways were familiar *and* collegial, functioning as agents of "critical collegiality" in relation to the practitioners (Lord 1994; see also Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1998). Familiarity comes from multiple sources, but one key constituent part is time, time to get to know each other.

Though their school interaction strategies varied, all CISE staff who worked on CSRD operated according to a collaborative leadership style ('let's figure this out together') rather than a hierarchical

one (Blase and Anderson, 1995). This helped avoid the problem of familiarity leading to contempt. If, as previously asserted, Maine educators were resistant to 'top-down' anything, then it follows that CISE staffers' attempts to act collegially were culturally responsive. At a May 2001 workshop with CSRSD schools in Maine, we characterized this type of interaction as the "lateral exchange of information."<sup>xiii</sup> However awkward it may be, that term has stuck, and the practices and relationships that it describes have become part of CISE staff members' explicit goals and vocabulary.

## EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

An obvious presumption of this paper is that Maine's CSRSD implementation is proceeding successfully, so it follows that we should clarify how it is successful. Cuban (1998) suggests there are at least five frames through which an educational reform policy can be evaluated: effectiveness, popularity, fidelity, adaptability, and longevity. He then clarifies this by saying the last two criteria are more often used by practitioners than formal evaluators. Using all five of these criteria, there is evidence of Maine's success.

McLaughlin (1987) cautions that evaluation of a policy implementation must be sensitive to the stage of implementation at the time of measurement. Evaluators should try to avoid, for example, prematurely looking for outcome data. Offering a concrete example of this logic, staff at the Maine CSRSD high school that most impressed us told us to "wait for the Class of 2004" before using outcomes to appraise their reform efforts. That class will be the first one at that school to have experienced each of the new practices the school has used for all four years of their high school experience. With McLaughlin's caveat and the teachers' admonition in mind, we nonetheless can report from a policy effectiveness standpoint that at the first 11 CSRSD schools in Maine there has been a general improvement in Maine Education Assessment scores and a narrowing of the achievement gap between these schools and the Maine average since CSRSD implementation began (Lane and Hamann, 2002). Data were not yet available from the second cohort at the time of this writing. Complementing this outcome data, we have collected survey responses from 387 teachers at the first 11 CSRSD schools for the year three evaluation. A majority of these teachers felt that high schools in Maine were improving because of *Promising Futures*, and a larger majority agreed that "the current reform initiatives at my school have positively affected students' academic achievement."<sup>xiv</sup>

Popularity is a measure of a reform's success because it hints at how a reform's problem diagnosis and proposed problem resolution resonate with various stakeholder audiences. By this measure, the consistently full enrollments at the CISE-organized *Promising Futures* Summer Academies, more

applications than can be accommodated for new rounds of CSR/D awards, and the increasing interest of policymakers in other states, at the national level, and in philanthropies all illustrate the popularity of Maine's initiative. Both Vermont and Rhode Island have looked closely at Maine's implementation of *Promising Futures*, modeling their newer state-level high school reform plans on much of it (Vermont High School Task Force, 2002).<sup>xv</sup> The U.S. Congress has requested information on Maine's experiences according to Michelle LaPointe (personal communication), an education program specialist who oversees the national CSR/D evaluation for the U.S. Department of Education. The National Clearinghouse on Comprehensive School Reform, the Institute for Educational Leadership, and the American Educational Research Association arranged for the lead author of this paper to present the same Maine story related here as part of a monthly policy briefing at the Library of Congress in May 2002. Finally, the Gates Foundation twice solicited staff at CISE to present proposals for how that foundation can support Maine's efforts. In October 2002, the foundation awarded almost \$10 million to support Maine's high school reform initiative.

By Cuban's (1998) third indicator of policy implementation success--fidelity of implementation--there is evidence that CISE leaders and Maine school personnel have largely adhered to enacting the promised reform initiatives. Referring again to our recently collected teacher survey data from the first cohort of Maine CSR/D schools, the average respondent at 9 of the 11 schools agreed that the strategies and methods of the CSR/D/*Promising Futures* implementation were "comprehensive and well aligned." In turn, the average respondent at 8 of the 11 schools agreed that "implementation of *Promising Futures* has been broadly supported by faculty, administration, and staff." When we asked about the particular *Promising Futures* practices that schools had agreed to implement--Core Practices #6, #7, #9, and #10--solid majorities at most schools indicated the practices were being implemented. (The actual implementation rates varied from practice to practice, but the trend just noted was clear.)

Cuban posits that the fourth and fifth indicators--adaptability and longevity--reference practitioner sensibilities more than the typical criteria for policy evaluation. In some senses adaptability is "the flip side of the fidelity standard" (Cuban, 1998, p. 460); it references how teachers can change and modify a policy to suit the micro-environment of their classrooms and schools. Yet we do not think our assertion of fidelity in implementation noted above contradicts our claim here that adaptability was also an operative feature of this policy implementation. Rather, the noted fidelity was to particular ideas and practices, but the implementation of these ideas and practices has been done with substantial instructor and school-site autonomy to figure out *how* and even *when*. As noted

elsewhere in this paper, the CISE-originating operative logic for supporting the CSRD/*Promising Futures* roll-out was constructivist. State personnel expected school-based educators to adapt *Promising Futures* practices as needed, but not to lose the underlying premise or quality of the reform in the process. CISE staffers situated themselves so as to share exemplary and cautionary tales from other sites and to promote the direct communication among practitioners at different sites. In this way, practitioners could learn from these informally shared cases and adapt them for use at their own sites.

In our dozens of site visits we encountered multiple instances of school personnel referencing how they had borrowed and adapted an implementation strategy from another site. We also encountered schools that had initially deferred the implementation of a given practice and then had gone ahead and pursued it once they determined that sufficient enabling conditions were in place. Such practices amounted to an adaptation of the chronology of implementation, but not a departure from the implementation's ultimate shape or purpose. Sarason (1990) emphasizes that reform initiatives will fail if educators do not encounter conditions for their own productive learning. Maine, to its credit, had created such conditions.

Regarding longevity, this is perhaps the most difficult of Cuban's (1998) criteria to assess because, at the time of this writing, *Promising Futures* is only a four-year-old document and the first cohort of CSRD-supported schools has only just finished receiving its three years of support. At first blush, a longitudinal perspective is difficult to construct. However, given Maine's success at getting CSRD funding for 33 high schools (roughly a quarter of the high schools in the state), persuading another two dozen high schools to develop implementation action plans in their unsuccessful bids for funding, and involving still more high schools in *Promising Futures* Summer Academies, it seems to us that Maine is approaching or has passed a 'critical mass' threshold where practices embraced by *Promising Futures* are in broad circulation and are being implemented at very different schools across the state. Thus we have some confidence projecting that this reform will meet longevity criteria.

By five quite different criteria, we have found evidence of the success of Maine's high school reform strategy. But before we end this section we want to offer two final points. First, Steigelbauer (1994) notes that successful school districts need to develop an ongoing, institutionalized capacity to change and that institutionalized change requires institutionalizing the habit of inclusion. Though our evidence of such habits and capacities in Maine comes from the state and school levels, we think the work there honors Steigelbauer's premise. To offer a hypothetical example, the comparatively

modest act of convincing a teacher to implement personalized learning plans will only be successful if (a) the teacher has the chance to understand and embrace the logic for such a practice and (b) if that same teacher has access to colleagues and external sources of expertise who can ensure that implementation is sufficiently adept (i.e., implementation missteps are corrected rather than understood as proof that a practice will not work). Maine has figured out how to routinely obtain both of these conditions.

Finally, we find the devotion and enthusiasm of CISE staff to be, in itself, an indicator of the reform's success. Those leading the reform subscribe to its logic. Indeed, they find it so compelling and so congruent with the various problem diagnoses they developed during their careers as school- and district-based educators, that they devote long hours to its implementation for comparatively modest material rewards.

## CONCLUSION

Maine's experience with CSRSD to date has been marked by the appropriation and customization of federal guidelines to create a coherent, targeted, and distinct program. This customization has allowed Maine to begin changing one of the most intransigent segments of the public education enterprise, the high school. The customizations support student-centered learning, interschool learning (as a mechanism of professional development), and habits of operation that should make Maine's CSRSD high schools sites of internally driven, ongoing reform. The customizations also have brought together a coherent reform framework (*Promising Futures*), resources (CSRSD funds and state funds), and a structure (CISE) that permits effective interaction between the state and high schools and among the high schools themselves. The strategies of action used by CISE staff (notably credibility-building modes of interaction with school-based educators) have positioned them to act with functional authority in a state where other styles of external leadership are viewed with great skepticism. Though 'appropriation' is an apt word to apply to the customizations of both the federal guidelines, 'appropriation' should not be understood mistakenly as weakening or 'watering down.' Maine's CSRSD strategy is moving forward with explicit acknowledgement that change agents need to understand and subscribe to the change they are proposing (Rust & Freidus, 2001). This applies to state-level practitioners as much as school-site staff.

The attempt at improvement in Maine is promising because it is attuned to both local dispositions and contemporary understanding regarding organizational change and improvement. The day-to-day enactment of CSRSD in Maine has created a living policy where the particulars are negotiated

and refined, but overarching principles endure. Thus, CISE staff and the practitioners at the various schools we visited have become important contributors to Maine's actual CSR policy. They are testing and revising various practices, contributing to the development of procedural knowledge about how to enact systemic high school improvement.

Levinson and Sutton have written, "Studies of appropriation in general can be a lever against unexamined assumptions in policy formation, because they show how policy in practice differs from policy as conceived authoritatively" (2001, p. 16). If we have pursued our task adequately here, then the potential value of state-level policy modification and supplementation for improving high schools should be clear. Maine neither accepted nor rejected the federal CSR policy blueprint. Rather it engaged that blueprint, attached it to other extant problem diagnoses and strategies of action, and thus figured a way to promote change while honoring educators as professionals and learners.

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<sup>i</sup> Without wanting to detour into too long a tangent on constructivism, we should clarify here that we are using constructivism to refer to how individual learners learn and that we are not making an assertion about social constructivism (i.e., the idea that domains of knowledge and truth do not exist separate from human creation of them). According to Phillips (2000, p. 7), constructivism (as we intend it) refers to the idea that learners make meaning out of their social experience rather than passively absorbing received wisdom. Because of this act of making, learners' previous understandings, including their understandings of those proposing to help them learn, figure powerfully in what meaning the learner makes—i.e., in what the learner learns.

<sup>ii</sup> CSR, also sometimes called 'Obey-Porter' after the two Congressmen who led the legislative effort to create it, was formally renamed the "Comprehensive School Reform" program, or CSR, in the new Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that became law in January 2002. Because the program was called CSR for the majority of the time period referred to in this paper, we use CSR instead of CSR.

<sup>iii</sup> See [http://www.lab.brown.edu/public/pubs/ME\\_Evaluation.pdf](http://www.lab.brown.edu/public/pubs/ME_Evaluation.pdf) (accessed 4/2/02).

<sup>iv</sup> The U.S. Department of Education resumed providing dedicated CSR funds to regional educational laboratories (REs) in early 2002.

<sup>v</sup> To clarify, while evaluation of CSR has frequently been the formal reason for our participation in various aspects of Maine CSR, it has also been understood that we are studying Maine's CSR implementation as researchers.

<sup>vi</sup> See Sizer (1983, 1984, 1992, 1996) and Sizer and Sizer (1999).

<sup>vii</sup> According to *Promising Futures* (p. 3), Maine ranked 32<sup>nd</sup> in the U.S. in per capita wealth, but 15<sup>th</sup> in per capita education spending. According to *Education Week's* "Quality Counts 2000", in 1997 Maine was third in the nation in education spending per \$1,000 of gross state product, trailing only Vermont and West Virginia (*Education Week* 2000, p. 83).

<sup>viii</sup> Though the bald listing of practices may make them seem rather abstract, within the *Promising Futures* document this hazard is reduced with the inclusion of specific suggestions and examples.

<sup>ix</sup> The most obvious exception to this is a CISE staffer who, during her eight years as a high school teacher, was mentored by one of the commission's co-chairs who was also her principal.

<sup>x</sup> Technically, SEAs were not required to apply for CSR funding and states could skip participating in CSR. However, though some states were slow to apply for funds, none of the SEAs eligible for the program opted out.

<sup>xi</sup> Using some of our CSR allocation, we, the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory, were subsequently taken up on our offer to Maine to conduct and fund their year one CSR evaluation. (See Lane and Hamann [2000].) So, this ultimately was not an expense for Maine in their first year.

<sup>xii</sup> Both of these definitions of types of authority are our own, though we expect they overlap with many published definitions.

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<sup>xiii</sup> We have also used the term 'lateral exchange of information' to refer to the equally popular practice of having school-based educators share experiences, ideas, and cautionary tales at CSRD retreats and during site visits to each others' schools.

<sup>xiv</sup> The teacher survey data being reported here was collected in the spring of 2002 for the year three Maine CSRD evaluation. At the time of this writing, we have not otherwise shared these results.

<sup>xv</sup> At its November 2000 "Rhode Island High School Summit: Systems Change for High Schools," the Rhode Island Department of Education actually distributed copies of *Promising Futures* to all of the conference participants.

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