

# REWARD SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: BUILDING A GOOD-TO-GREAT CYCLE OF EXCELLENCE

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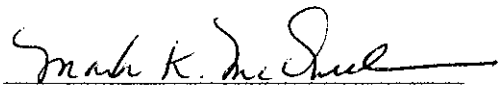
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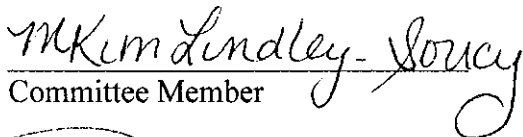
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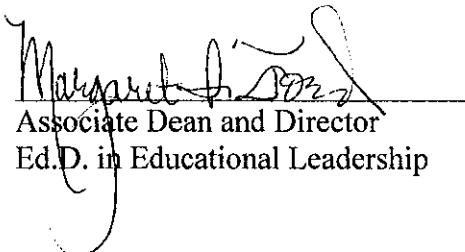
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### **Abstract**

For years, schools across the country have carried the label, and in many cases the reality, of being *schools in need of improvement*. School improvement plans, deficit analyses, and theories for school organizational improvement have saturated the landscape of school communities. While much of this work has been focused on strategies to correct existing deficiencies, very little is focused on taking schools with strong performance and solid foundations and enabling continuous and sustained growth. Collins (2001) in his book *Good to Great* examines the enabling factors that have distinguished companies that sustain a much greater rate of corporate success, or profit, than others. Many schools have looked to adapt these strategies for continuous improvement in student learning. A thorough examination of the enabling factors in schools that have shown this type of improvement, and a comparison of those factors with Collins' framework, will inform the discussion of "good to great" school improvement.

This qualitative study examined the factors present and enabling improvement in student learning in a designated *Reward School* in New Hampshire. Reward schools have been so designated because of sustained significant growth in student learning (US DOE, 2012). In particular, this study examined (1) the characteristics of the leadership present in the school; (2) the ways in which that leadership has supported the continuous improvement; and (3) the alignment of the external measures of improvement with the stated values in student learning held by the school staff and leadership. This qualitative study utilized a case study research design with data gathered through staff surveys, document analysis, and staff and principal interviews.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Ch. 1 Introduction.....	8
Problem Statement.....	9
Theoretical Framework.....	10
The Good to Great Theory.....	10
The Level 5 Leadership Theory.....	11
Level 5 Leadership Compared to Other Leadership Models.....	12
Other Good to Great Framework Theory Elements.....	13
Good to Great in the Social Sector.....	14
Critique of Good to Great Theory.....	15
Statement of Purpose and Research Questions.....	16
Overview of Methodology.....	17
Researcher and Researcher's Assumptions.....	18
Rationale, Significance, Need for the study.....	20
Leadership Hypotheses and Theories.....	22
Delimitations and Limitations of the Study.....	27
Definition of Terms.....	28
Summary.....	29
Ch. 2 Literature Review.....	31
Overview.....	31
Sustained Improvement in Educational Systems.....	32

Significance of Leadership.....	34
Level 5 Leadership Theory Applied to Schools.....	34
Growth in Teacher Quality.....	38
Implications of High Stakes Testing of Level 5 Leaders.....	39
Teacher Perceptions and Efficacy.....	42
Organizational Improvement.....	45
Transformational Leadership.....	46
Time to Improve.....	48
Professional Development and Organizational Learning.....	50
Conclusion.....	54
Level 5 Leadership and Transformational Leadership Framework.....	55
Ch. 3 Methodology.....	56
Introduction.....	56
Research Design.....	57
Research Setting and Context.....	58
Research Sample and Data Sources.....	59
Data Collection Methods.....	62
Data Analysis Methods.....	65
Ethical Considerations.....	67
Trustworthiness.....	68
Limitations and Delimitations.....	69
Summary.....	70
Ch. 4 Presenting Results.....	72

Introduction.....	72
Part I: Research Setting and Context.....	74
Part II: Improvement Factors.....	77
Beginnings: Confronting the Challenge.....	77
Bringing a Systems Perspective.....	85
Expanding the Systems View: Good to Great Framework.....	87
Confronting the Brutal Facts.....	88
Culture of Discipline.....	89
Hedgehog Concept.....	95
The Flywheel.....	103
First Who... Then What.....	112
Leveraging Technology.....	116
Part III: Values in Student Learning.....	119
NECAP in Context.....	119
Image of a Graduate.....	123
Part IV: Leadership.....	139
Mission and Vision Focus.....	140
Talent Development.....	147
Personal Characteristics.....	152
Focus on Results.....	163
Culture.....	165
Data Outside the Framework.....	173
Ch. 5 Analysis, Interpretation, and Synthesis of Findings.....	180

Conclusions and Discussion.....	181
Analytic Category 1: Perceived Improvement Factors.....	181
Analytic Category 2: Values in Student Learning.....	187
Analytic Category 3: Leadership.....	190
Theme 1: Mission and Vision Focus.....	191
Theme 2: Talent Development.....	192
Theme 3: Personal Characteristics.....	194
Theme 4: Focus on Results.....	195
Theme 5: Culture.....	196
Theme 6: Findings Outside the Framework.....	197
Summary of Findings.....	200
Recommendations.....	202
Recommendation 1: Focus and Monitor.....	203
Recommendation 2: Empower Good Systems.....	204
Recommendation 3: Conduct a Values Check.....	205
Recommendation 4: Lead with Empathy.....	205
Implications.....	207
Suggestions for Further Research.....	208
Closing Summary.....	209
References.....	211
Appendices.....	222
Appendix A: Invitation to Participate.....	222
Appendix B: Informed Consent.....	223

Appendix C: Permission from Supervisor.....	225
Appendix D: Interview Protocol.....	226
Appendix E: Staff Survey.....	229
Appendix F: Reward School Methodology.....	231

### **List of Tables and Figures**

Table 2.1: Level 5 Leadership and Transformational Leadership Framework.....	55
Figure 4.1: Lighthouse, State and Reward Average Combined NECAP Growth.....	75
Figure 4.2: Lighthouse, State and Reward Average Free and Reduced.....	76
Figure 4.3: EDies Application Chart.....	128
Figure 4.4: Image of a Graduate.....	130
Figure 5.1: Lighthouse Leadership for School Improvement.....	207

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

What does it take to move an organization from *good* to *great*? Jim Collins (2001), in his widely acclaimed work, *Good to Great*, studied the characteristics of companies that had outperformed most others and had sustained growth over many years. He found that this particular set of companies shared a few significant common characteristics. Good-to-great companies were characterized by (1) a practice of confronting the “brutal facts”; (2) hiring the right people *before* establishing the improvement strategy; (3) leveraging carefully selected technologies; (4) establishing a clear and narrow purpose; (5) building a culture of discipline; and (6) having what Collins termed *Level 5 leaders*.

Since its publication, many schools and school systems have been attracted to Collins’ theory as a framework for school improvement. This study will explore the research on schools that have sustained improvement in student achievement and compare the enabling factors for that improvement within a good-to-great framework. In particular, (1) are the characteristics of good-to-great companies also evident in *reward schools*? (2) Does leadership serve the same function in reward schools as it does in good-to-great companies? It seems straightforward to measure companies by the one singular output measure of cumulative stock returns. If great schools are defined similarly, do their output measures, i.e., test scores, offer validating evidence of greatness within the context of public education?

Many schools have looked to Collins’ work to gain insight into school improvement and increased student achievement. Schools have refocused their efforts on narrowing their missions and establishing systems for continuous improvement. That said, research is incomplete at best



as to the potential differences in addressing “good-to-great schools” as opposed to good-to-great companies. While schools take and apply wholesale the work of Collins to themselves, they may be missing some important differences particularly with regard to points of leverage for improvement within the school context. Indeed, the leadership qualities themselves necessary for guiding this kind of improvement may be very different in school settings where the translation of “profit” may be more uniquely connected to the values of student learning embedded at each school rather than universally accepted as state test scores.

### **Problem Statement**

The challenges for educational leaders are many. They are faced with continued accountability pressure for results amidst a policy environment that defines effective teaching by singular and often narrow measures of student learning. They must find ways to put those measures of student learning in a context broad enough to create a sense of ownership among multiple stakeholders with a broader vision of excellence in teaching and learning. These challenges require skillful leadership in the areas of (1) setting direction; (2) developing people; (3) redesigning the organization; and (4) managing the instructional program (Leithwood & Strauss, 2009). The leadership challenge is therefore complex and requires the ability in a leader to adapt to various contexts in a shifting policy environment, while keeping focus on a clear vision.

Educational leaders must also navigate an accountability system that defines failing schools, but does not recognize continuous growth in schools that are not failing. The current policy environment at the national, state, and local level is keyed in on accountability for “adequate” progress, not exceptional progress. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001

ushered in a new era of school sanctions, high stakes assessments, and school improvement mandates. More recently in 2009, the federal Race to the Top (RTTT) funding competition through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and related federal education priorities focus on connecting teacher and principal effectiveness to student learning results. In addition, the federal focus in RTTT is almost exclusively targeted on the lowest-achieving schools (McGuinn, 2012). While much of the national focus has been on underperforming schools and the leadership necessary to establish “turnaround schools,” there has been less attention paid to the type of leadership necessary to take schools that already are performing well and see that they get better. These schools may parallel what Collins (2001) researched as good-to-great companies.

In order to fully understand the value of this framework for school improvement and the essential characteristics of improvement strategies for schools going from good to great, it is important to study schools that have seen student achievement improving over sustained periods of time; these schools may hold the most promise in modeling a pathway to greatness for all schools. While the particular path to greatness may be different from school to school, any common themes about their journeys may hold promise in informing a larger policy framework for school improvement and accountability.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **The Good to Great Theory**

As Collins (2001) compared companies that sustained high performance and high growth with companies that started in the same place but did not grow, he found some important

differences that led to the development of his theory of what it takes to move a company from good to great. Good-to-great companies were characterized by a practice of confronting the “brutal facts,” hiring the right people before establishing the improvement strategy, leveraging carefully selected technologies, and establishing a clear and narrow purpose. In addition, good-to-great companies were characterized by a culture of discipline and having Level 5 leaders.

### **The Level 5 Leadership Theory**

While it would be difficult to isolate any one of the characteristics of good to great companies without the added effects of the others, Collins does separate out Level 5 leadership as unique: “We found a symbiotic relationship between Level 5 and the remaining findings. On the one hand, Level 5 traits enable you to implement the other findings; on the other hand, practicing the other findings helps you to become Level 5” (Collins, 2001, p. 38). To put it another way, Level 5 leadership is the glue that binds everything else together, and seems a particularly critical element in establishing a systems approach to organizational improvement. It is the leadership stance that establishes and enables all other factors in the organization.

So what is Level 5 leadership? What does it take to lead a company to continuous improvement? As Collins (2001) describes, Level 5 leadership is characterized by personal humility and professional will. That is to say, Level 5 leaders are ambitious, but not for their own personal gain as much as for the gain of the organization. They are not driven by ego, but by purpose. As a result, they are quick to attribute any success to the efforts of other individuals in the organization and not take the credit themselves. They are, however, quick to willingly assume the blame if things are not going well. Leaders in the comparison (non-improving) companies, by contrast, take the credit if things were going well and cast the blame elsewhere if

things are not. These leaders often exhibited qualities of Leaders in Levels 1-4, which, as Collins defines, range from highly capable individuals (Level 1) to effective leaders with a clear vision and high performance standards (Level 4).

Level 5 leaders are also fanatically focused on results and exhibit tremendous diligence in getting them. Still, they are compellingly modest. Perhaps the greatest sign that they are more concerned with the company's gain than their own advancement is that they consciously set the organization up for success upon departure so their successor could continue the growth of the company. In contrast, most of the leaders in the comparison companies set their successors up for failure. All of these qualities proved particularly important during pivotal transition years in a company. Level 5 leaders were able to innovate and adapt in the face of adversity and uncertainty.

### **Level 5 Leadership Theory Compared to Other Leadership Models**

The Level 5 leader embodies elements of multiple leadership theories and models that may cut across private and public sectors. The Level 5 leader is in part a *Transformational* leader who is driven towards continuous improvement and a collective sense of purpose (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). The Transformational leader, by definition, is equipped to adapt to multiple challenges and lead the organization to improvement in the face of adversity. This leadership style also takes into account the moral purpose of an organization. As Caldwell et al. (2011) note, "Transformative leadership is an ethically based leadership model that integrates a commitment to values and outcomes by optimizing the long-term interests of stakeholders and society and honoring the moral duties owed by organizations to their stakeholders" (p. 176). In this sense, a Level 5 leader is closely

aligned with the characteristics of a Transformational leader, perhaps with specific personality dispositions such as humility and modesty.

Also related is the model of *distributed* leadership (Spillane, Healey, & Parise, 2009). Within this framework the Level 5 leader also builds the capacity of the organization through the efforts, responsibility, and authority of other leadership roles. A distributive leader may be most likely to deflect praise to other members of the organization, as a Level 5 leader does. Also, this leadership model may be best suited to carrying out some of the other good-to-great elements, such as considering *first who then what* in hiring people capable of contributing meaningfully to the development of a sustained system improvement strategy. The elements of a distributive leader in the context of an organization focused on improvement are important to consider in sustaining that improvement (Spillane, Healey, & Parise, 2009). By distributing the responsibilities for organizational improvement, the leader better ensures the improvements will last beyond his or her tenure as leader.

### **Other Good-to-Great Framework Theory Elements**

Collins (2001) found that the Level 5 leader in good-to-great companies promotes a culture of discipline where people are not driven as much by the tasks they need to complete as by the responsibilities they have for innovation and improvement. Probably the most critical component of this disciplined culture is hiring the right people. Collins phrases this as “first who...then what” meaning great leaders and great companies did not find people who would fit into a prescribed vision; they found people who would add to it.

Collins also found this theme of discipline extended to the disposition of those in charge to confront the brutal facts and narrow a deliberate focus of action. Confronting the brutal facts is admitting when something is not working. Companies that did not grow to greatness in Collins' study generally held on to failing strategies or did not adapt to developments in the market. Collins described narrowing a deliberate focus of action as the *hedgehog concept*. This concept reflects the stance that the company would take to focus all of their energy in three overlapping spheres: (1) What you are deeply passionate about; (2) what you can be best in the world at; and (3) what drives your economic engine. To say it another way, it is the alignment of mission, expertise, and efficiency.

### **Good to Great in the Social Sector**

Collins (2005) acknowledges that his study of good to great companies may not translate perfectly to organizations in the social sectors, such as schools, churches, government, and non-profits. In his monograph to accompany *Good to Great, Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, Collins speaks to the challenges in adapting his framework to the social sectors, citing a critical difference in the absence of profit motives (Collins, 2005). Nonetheless, he considers the analogous factors in social sectors for the major elements of his theory of organizational improvement.

The critical challenge when analyzing the social sectors is defining the measure of greatness in the first place. Collins (2005) points out that there are fewer widely agreed-upon metrics of performance, and that money is generally an input rather than the singular measure as an output. Along with this, the leadership structure is generally more diffused with less clear executive power. These differences may be trivial when it comes to the application of Collins'

framework or they may be significant. To be clear, Collins did not replicate his research in any of the social sectors in his monograph; he simply applied the logic of his theoretical framework to what he had learned in interviews with various individuals in social sector organizations.

Another significant difference in the social sector is the structure and make-up of the labor force. Applying the idea of *first who then what* becomes more complicated with many tenure-based systems and the volunteer structures of non-profits. While the element of hiring with great care is applicable, Collins argues sometimes in the social sector it is more a matter of getting the wrong people off the bus. This gets even more complicated in his assertion that social sector organizations often fail to *confront the brutal facts* and instead are characterized by a “culture of niceness” (Collins, 2005).

### **Critique of Good to Great Theory**

Of course, multiple theories exist around organizational improvement. While this study focuses on the application of Collins’ theory, it is important to recognize certain critiques of his theory so as to strengthen the application of the theoretical framework and also inform the research methodology to avoid any misapplication. Rosenzweig (2007), in his book *The Halo Effect* notes potential flaws in the development of organizational business improvement theories such as *Good to Great*. He argues that researchers and academics tend to falsely attribute causes to a company’s success because success breeds the perception of success. He calls this the “Halo Effect.” He notes, for example, that corporate success leads to positive work climate, and not the other way around. Also, corporate success leads to the perception of strong leadership thus making it difficult to isolate the effect of strong leadership by studying the perception of the leader’s influence after that success has been established.

Another caution Rosenzweig offers is the age-old trap of assuming *correlation* is *causation*. Oftentimes in looking at organizations that have improved, researchers may attribute the success of a company to correlated factors. Even if researchers can isolate factors that relate to a rise in performance, one must be careful to assume that those factors *caused* the increase in performance. In a similar vein, Rosenzweig points out even if strategies are identified to be different in great companies than in good companies, it does not mean that all companies that execute those strategies will achieve greatness. He uses an analogy of a racetrack where big winners are all found to be big betters, which is meant to point out the obvious, that all big betters are not big winners.

Rosenzweig also directly critiques the way Collins and his team conducted their research. He points out that the quantity of Collins' data is irrelevant if the data is not of high quality. In particular, he takes issue with the use of document analysis to draw inferences from business articles, company reports, and other documents that would likely be skewed by the Halo Effect. The same holds true of the interviews with CEOs, he argues, who are looking back after achieving greatness to attribute the causes. In the end, he questions the ability of any research to find absolutes or the "physics" of great companies. He argues that greatness is the result of *strategy* and *execution*, but is quick to note there are no absolutes as to which strategies, and execution is a context-dependent proposition. Lastly, he does not discount the importance of luck.

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this dissertation study is to explore the connection between Collins' good-to-great framework with schools that have shown a pathway of good-to-great performance by



virtue of being designated as Title I Reward Schools. This study will not only examine (1) the contributing factors of that success as perceived by the broader school community, but it will also examine (2) the alignment of values held by school staff for student learning with the values implied by the prescribed method of determining *reward school* status. To shed light on the problem, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. How do the perceived enabling factors for school improvement by teachers and administrators in an identified Reward School compare with Collins' good-to-great framework?
2. How do the indicators of success that are most valued by teachers and administrators in this schools compare with the indicators that define their identified status as great (i.e., a Reward School)?
3. How do the characteristics of the leadership in a school that has been designated as *Reward Schools* compare with Collins' construct of Level 5 Leadership?

### **Overview of Methodology**

This qualitative study will utilize a case study design with a school selected from designated Reward Schools in New Hampshire. Reward schools have been selected through a methodology defined in the New Hampshire Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility Waiver from the school accountability structure defined in No Child Left Behind (US DOE, 2001). This designation stems from a statistical method of analyzing student growth on combined math and reading New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) scores for all grades in each school. The method is inclusive of all Title I schools in New Hampshire. Title

I schools are schools with higher relative percentages of students receiving free and reduced lunch than non-Title I schools. Title I schools, by virtue of the fact that they have higher relative rates of poverty, represent schools that are not overly advantaged by high socioeconomic status.

The fact that Reward Schools are chosen from the whole of Title I schools also differentiates the sample from schools that receive recognition through a partially self-selected process such as the National Blue Ribbon Program and New Hampshire Excellence in Education Awards Program (“ED”ies). In these latter cases, schools may be initially nominated, but then choose to go through an application and review process, which removes the element of comparison with schools of similar or higher performance who do not choose to go through that application process. This Reward School methodology will be further explained in Chapter 3.

Sources of evidence used in this study will include (1) interviews, (2) teacher surveys, and (3) document analysis. Of these, interview data provide the largest part of the study. Surveys will be designed to get representative perspectives from school staff members on the enabling factors for school improvement and success. Lastly, documentation will include A) mission statements, B) vision statements, C) school-generated public progress reports or profiles, and D) related improvement plan documents.

### **Researcher and Researcher’s Assumptions**

Based on his experience and background as a classroom teacher, and school and district administrator, the researcher begins this study with two primary assumptions: (1) that multiple aspects of Collins’ theoretical model will be present and relevant for schools showing continuous improvement, although schools, intentionally or otherwise, will have adapted these constructs to

fit their own particular school setting and culture; and (2) there are important elements of schools that may challenge the achievement of continuous improvement despite the fidelity to Collins' theory.

Other assumptions underwrite this study. The researcher assumes that primary among these is the level of expectation the staff has for *all* students. Whereas personnel in private companies may be less likely to assume there is a limit to the company's growth, personnel in schools are more apt to place a limit on the percentage of students who will achieve high standards. To say it another way, one might be more likely to hear "those students will never reach that standard" in schools than to hear "those people will never buy that product" in companies.

Moreover, the researcher openly acknowledges the considerable difference in the value placed on the defined measures of greatness in schools and businesses. Collins used the single metric of cumulative stock returns as the measure of greatness. In contrast, while a measure of cumulative student growth on a narrow set of assessments may be the key metric for Reward Schools, the researcher assumes the school community would value a more robust and comprehensive set of metrics to truly define greatness. Finally, the researcher acknowledges that the same experiences that are valuable in providing insight into existing school improvement efforts could also bias judgments made in the research design and interpretation of findings.

In addition to declaring these assumptions explicit at the outset of the study, the researcher is committed to critical self-reflection through journaling and dialogue with professional colleagues and advisors. Also, to address subjectivity and strengthen the credibility

of the research, various procedural safeguards will be taken, such as triangulation of data sources, triangulation of methods, and inter-rater reliability checks with professional colleagues.

### **Rationale, Significance, Need for the study**

Since the mid 1980's and the release of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), there has been a call nationally to improve our schools to restore their competitive place against the leading educational systems in the world. For decades now, the United States has suffered in comparison to systems in Finland, Singapore, Japan, Shanghai, and others when looking at international data comparisons from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Tucker, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010). These comparisons have spurred a number of ideas for improving our schools and new federal policies to address issues present in the lowest performing schools.

The default assumption in No Child Left Behind (2001) is that students *are* being left behind. In particular, the law disaggregated for the first time students by socioeconomic and racial subgroups, and structured accountability to expect adequate yearly progress (AYP) in each of those subgroups. By 2012 in New Hampshire, 71% of schools did not make AYP in one or more areas. Trends such as this have fueled an assumption that schools are failing, particularly in regard to the achievement gap, and that the most effective way to improve them is by identifying schools and/or teachers as effective or ineffective through the use of high stakes tests. These assumptions are not only unproven given the success of recent policy, but they are in stark contrast to the prevailing assumptions and structure of leading systems in other countries. Tucker (2011) notes that many of the leading countries on international assessments, including Finland, Japan, and Singapore, do not place heavy emphasis on the kinds of strict top-down

accountability measures that we see in NCLB, RTTT, and the ESEA waivers. Instead, they give flexible support to reach high standards. They value the professional status of the teaching workforce, and they understand the connections between economic and educational systems. Darling-Hammond (2010) adds to that the notion of “intelligent, reciprocal accountability,” such as in Finland where schools are held accountable for performance to the same extent the government is accountable for support to schools.

Furthermore, these countries do not narrow or concentrate the curriculum and school programs to a limited few, such as reading and mathematics; they offer a deep and rich curriculum focused on in-depth understanding and application of key concepts. Sahlberg (2011) notes that in Finland teachers act more as researchers, focusing on high quality instruction and authentic assessment. Darling-Hammond (2010) notes that in many of these countries teachers spend 50% of their time in planning and professional collaboration, as compared to 15-20% in the United States. The assumption working in these countries starts with the belief that teachers are professionals of the highest caliber. This is followed by a second belief that governments should play a supporting role in ensuring high quality professional autonomy with high standards of student expectations. These countries focus on excellence, not adequacy.

With so much of the national attention focused on the needs of vastly underperforming schools, little policy discussion is currently focused on the needs and enabling factors of continuously improving schools. While it is hard to ignore the critical need to develop capacity in the lowest performing schools, it may be equally important to identify, cultivate, and expand on the best models of education. These schools may hold the greatest promise for a pathway of excellence for our nation’s education system. These schools are the ones most likely to compare

well in terms of student achievement with the most highly regarded school systems in the world. As a result, they may hold insights into the development of a world-class education system in the United States.

This study will examine the theoretical framework for Collins' work with companies in regards to leadership and examine them to see if the same theory is applicable to high performing schools. This topic is significant because it represents an area of leadership research that affects a majority of public schools. Indeed, if we are to build a truly world-class public education system, we must examine more than what it takes to go from "bad to good" or from "partially proficient to proficient." We need to examine what it takes for schools to sustain improvement and to sustain excellence.

In examining the enabling factors for continued improvement and sustained greatness, there may be important implications for local, state, and federal policy. While the most recent state accountability policy in New Hampshire provides for the identification of Reward Schools, which are defined as the schools showing the most consistent growth in student learning, there is no corresponding structure to facilitate the expansion of these schools. The great majority of school improvement levers in policy and resources of support are still focused on the underperforming schools identified as Priority Schools and Focus Schools. This study may make a contribution to the dialogue concerning such policies.

### **Leadership Hypotheses and Theories**

The characteristics of a leader in *reward schools* will likely overlap with his/her ability to build capacity in the organization through talent development. In a school setting, such leaders

will likely employ effective use of professional development and communicate a clear focus on improvement goals. Because in schools the values placed on different metrics, i.e., test scores, are not universally accepted, the Level 5 school leader will be a skilled communicator and consensus builder. This may be the most significant difference between *reward school* leaders and non-reward school leaders. That is to say, the latter may struggle more with communication and consensus building, leading to pockets of improvement but no overall long-term improvement. To that point, leaders in reward schools will likely represent organizational stability, both in their own tenure of leadership as well as their ability to keep focus on common and consistent values through a shifting policy environment.

These differences could lead to other qualities of leadership being evidenced as critical elements of successful reward school leaders. The ability, for example, to communicate effectively with a variety of stakeholders may prove to be critical. After all, a school's success depends in part on the public's support of the school system and the level of involvement of the community or individuals outside the school institution itself. Whereas Level 5 leaders are defined mostly by what they do with people *within* the organization, school leaders must also be attuned to various groups *outside* the organization in addition to managing the inner core of the school. As an extension, the general political environment at the local, state, and national levels all factor into the success of the school leader. Most importantly, in times when the political pressures are at odds with the values in the organization, the effective school leader must serve as a bridge in communicating how external pressures relate to internal values, while at the same time keeping employees focused, or the "eyes on the prize." This may mean, for example, not dismissing high stakes tests, but putting them in the proper context of essential student learning as one piece of the puzzle or one snapshot in the photo album of student performance.

This element of focus may indeed prove to be most important to reward school leaders, assuming these schools have other evidence of student learning that shows signs of student success. To put it another way, it is easy in a very low-performing school to use the high stakes test as the only measure because in these schools there are usually other, even more obvious indicators that paint a bleak picture of school quality. These indicators may be school climate, parent participation, staff turnover, or other indicators one might argue are both the cause and effect of low performance. These schools are generally characterized by high percentages of students living in poverty, high levels of absence and truancy issues, and generally more limited financial resources (Leithwood & Strauss, 2009). In many ways, a leader who can get the staff to rally around the high stakes test can start to build small victories and celebrate differences in achievement. By contrast, in many higher achieving schools the high stakes test is at best seen as a nuisance and at worst a “selling out” of what is most valuable in student learning. The reward school leader who is able, arguably, needs to put the focus on high leverage areas of student improvement that align *both* with core values in student learning and the high stakes test.

To give an example, one might consider the high stakes state assessment and the response items that ask students to explain their thinking. If reasoning is of higher value in these items in the construct of the assessment, and reasoning is a premium value in student learning in a school, then this may be an important area of focus instructionally without making it “all about the test.” These schools may find success in establishing this “common ground” of important student academic expectations.

In addition, as evidence mounts that the high stakes test is presenting less and less of a challenge to the overall population of students in the school, but still a challenge to certain



subgroups, a reward school leader will need to balance the external accountability of making *adequate yearly progress* (AYP) with the internal value of continuous improvement for all.

Finding ways to continue to have all students challenged, while still closing the gaps for struggling groups of students, presents a challenge of balancing the value of *all* students achieving at the grade level standard, with the pressure of lowering expectations for some students and needing to raise expectations for others.

To identify these important leadership characteristics it will be important to explore both leader self-perceptions as well as follower perceptions of leaders. As DeRue and Ashford (2010) noted in their study on leadership and followership identity, traditional models of top-down and positional leadership are insufficient to establish leadership identity. How followers view the individual as a leader is an important element in the degree to which that leader actually is effective in raising performance. In schools, for example, teachers need to see the principal as a leader and champion of student learning, not as a politician or desk manager. The perception of the leader as someone who knows what is going on in the classroom from day to day is an important factor in leadership identity in reward schools. The success of schools as organizations is focused on student learning at the classroom level. If the leader appears “out of touch” with that, there will be a perceived disconnect between the leader and the core mission of the organization or school.

Also to that end, effective school leaders must exercise *instructional leadership*, which is to say they are intensely focused on the core business of schools-teaching and learning. Studies have shown that this type of leadership is effective in raising student outcomes (Hallinger, 2010; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowel, 2008). Characteristics of an instructional leader include clear

communication about mission and goals related to instruction, feedback on instruction including teacher evaluation and monitoring of student goals, and strong professional development strategies, including the protection of professional time (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). In some ways, the instructional leader who closely resembles the Level 5 leader is one who can narrow the focus on the core mission of the organization. This is helpful not only in inspiring staff buy-in, but it is also helpful in leveraging efforts to the core of what will impact learning the most. The instructional leader by definition is connected to the day to day teaching and learning in the classroom.

Lastly, among the qualities that a reward school leader must have is the desire to learn and to be transparent about that learning. School leaders are, after all, leaders of institutions for learning. To be able to model that learning, and show by example that everyone can continue to learn, is an important factor in establishing true reflective practice. In a distributed team setting, how that leader models learning and engages in collective inquiry is an important factor in team effectiveness (Spillane, Healey, & Parise, 2009).

Schools, like other organizations, need to have systems in place to sustain improvement. In the end, sustaining improvement is about the ability to continue to adjust to the current situation and take important feedback to improve. This ability to reflect and adapt is what Argyris (1976) and Fullan (2008) describe as the ability to adapt as a learning organization. Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky (2009) define *adaptive leadership* as “the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive (p. 16). This notion of “thriving” goes beyond maintaining the status quo to sustained improvement. Keegan and Lahey (2009) build on this concept by exploring some of the underlying barriers people consciously or unconsciously place

in the way of change. Reward school leaders need to guide employees through a process of reflection, and similar to Collins' assertion for the need to "confront the brutal facts," these leaders need to build the capacity in their school to confront new challenges and to adapt systems of instruction to improve student learning.

### **Delimitations and Limitations of the Study**

As previously noted, Collins (2001) uses a simple one-dimensional metric to identify good-to-great companies. This makes perfect sense for companies since the "bottom line" is the single, most important consideration. At the end of the day, all other factors such as employee and customer satisfaction would be assumed to contribute to the bottom line measure. In education, it can be argued that the bottom line measure is student learning. Schools exist to educate students and evidence as to how well they do that should be clear in the results of assessments of student learning. It would be conceivable that other measures, such as student attendance, would contribute to the bottom line of student learning.

The challenge when choosing a single metric for educational excellence or greatness is that there are very few measures of student learning inclusive of all students that would allow the comparison of schools over time. Some existing measures such as the SAT are not given generally to every student. Further, many are not given at multiple grade levels. Also, some performance measures such as the dropout rate may be proxies for measures of student learning, but by their nature are measures at the end of high school, making it hard to attribute effectiveness to the specific make-up of schools along the way. With NCLB, states must designate or develop assessments to be used in common by schools across the state and tied to state level standards for the purposes of accountability. In many states, such as New Hampshire,

those assessments are the only common measures of academic performance given at all elementary, middle, and high schools.

This research will contribute to the current body of educational leadership research in two ways. First, the research will explore what may be unique about leadership in schools that continue to improve from good to great, whereas most of the prevailing research is focused on the lowest achieving schools and school improvement from a lower starting point. With all of the research and theory focused on educational leadership, it would be helpful to be clearer about any potential differences in reward schools as Collins had examined those differences in industry. Second, it would explore common elements and possible differences between leaders in reward schools and Level 5 leaders in private industry as defined by Collins. This may help add to the knowledge base of what may be unique about school improvement in higher performing schools, and may speak more effectively to systems change towards continuous improvement.

### **Definition of Terms**

#### **School Improvement**

The plans and strategies put into place to increase student achievement through the implementation of systemic changes to school processes and structures, such as curriculum, assessment, instruction, supervision, collaborative professional time and professional development (Fullan, 2001).

## Student Achievement

Evidenced levels of proficiency on student assessment measures common across selected schools. In New Hampshire that assessment is the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) and will become the Smarter Balanced Assessment in 2015. NECAP proficiency levels in reading and math are used to determine Reward School status (NH DOE).

## Level 5 Leader

As defined by Collins (2001), a leader who puts the interests of the organization above their own, who exhibits personal humility and professional will, who attributes success to others and blame to themselves, and who position the organization for success beyond their tenure. This leader stands in contrast to leaders at levels 1-4.

## Hedgehog Concept

As defined by Collins (2001), the narrowing of an organization's focus to zero in on the core mission, the one thing which would make the company the best in the world.

## The Flywheel Effect

As defined by Collins (2001), the process of incremental and purposeful organizational improvement, rather than change via grand revolution or wholesale restructuring. The effect produces sustainable and increasingly dramatic change.

## Summary

Our national policy is now focused on raising standards and student achievement, especially the achievement of students living in poverty or isolated because of race. We need to

move away from accountability systems that identify mediocrity and failure. Indeed, if we are to build a truly world class public education system, we must examine more than what it takes to go from “bad to good” or from “partially proficient to proficient.” We need now to identify what it takes to go from “good-to-great.” We need to examine what enables schools to sustain improvement and to sustain excellence. We need to develop policies that are more strength-based than deficiency-based. These policies should do more than identify “reward schools.” They should place reciprocal accountability for states and schools to identify what elements make up these great schools and be broad enough to affect a system that extends from teacher preparation to family engagement. Only then will we possibly move out of the state of adequacy and into the state of excellence.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Overview

A great deal of research already exists in the area of school improvement, and the factors that enable it. Transformational leadership is often cited as the model of leadership necessary to enable continuous organizational improvement. Research also abounds in the area of school leadership, in particular leadership models as they relate to achievement in low performing or “turnaround” schools. There is a smaller set of research focused on the contributing factors of school improvement in schools that sustain good-to-great patterns of improvement. This review will explore the existing body of research in this area as it falls within the broader context of school improvement and educational leadership.

The purpose of this case study is to explore the factors that enable continuous growth in student achievement from average performance to very good performance- classifying the school as a Reward School- and compare those factors with the theoretical framework laid out by Collins (2001) in *Good to Great*. The study also explored the value school community members place on the external determining factors for greatness (i.e., test scores) in these high performing schools. Finally, it examined the role of the principal in leading Reward Schools in the improvement in student learning.

This critical review explores themes related to high performing and improving schools and school systems, and the leadership necessary to facilitate that growth. Research presented here focuses on broad factors initially, and then narrows focus to explore the particular leadership structures and styles as they relate to Collins’ (2001) construct of Level 5 Leaders as

well as Burns' (1978) construct of *Transformational Leadership*. This organization of the findings will help connect various aspects of school improvement under Collins' and Burns' overall theoretical framework.

Research for this literature review was completed using multiple information sources, including books, dissertations, professional journals, and internet resources. These materials were accessed primarily through the use of ERIC, EBSCOhost, Education Full Text, and Academic Search Complete, and ProQuest Digital Dissertations databases. Published books on leadership as well as articles available through current coursework were also included. The sources were bounded by relevancy in the current policy environment, and were therefore limited generally to the last ten to fifteen years. Key words or phrases included combinations of mostly the following: *school improvement, good to great, student achievement, educational leadership, teacher perceptions, parent perceptions, continuous improvement, systems change, and policy*.

### **Sustained Improvement in Educational Systems**

There has been a great deal of interest in the last ten years in studying the elements of highly effective educational systems across the globe. One of the most comprehensive studies undertaken has been referred to as the McKinsey Report. For this study, Mourshed, Chijioke, and Barber (2010) researched school systems internationally that had significant widespread gains in student outcomes in international and national assessments from 1980 onwards. This study focused at a systems level, as opposed to the school level, and used criteria for selection that produced a diverse sample of systems with high student performance to illuminate universal trends in system characteristics. These systems were further characterized into two categories, "Sustained Improvers" and "Promising Starts." These systems had equal performance but the



latter systems only showed evidence of high performance over a recent, shorter two or three year time period.

Researchers for the McKinsey Report, interestingly, broke down the improving school systems into four performance stages: *poor to fair*, *fair to good*, *good to great*, and *great to excellent*. They then studied the interventions or strategies used to facilitate that growth. They considered the interventions specific to each performance stage, as well as the interventions universal across performance stages. What they found was the interventions used in the lower two performance stages were more centrally controlled and prescriptive, while the interventions used in the higher two performance stages were more locally controlled and focused on developing and empowering professionals. In the *great to excellent* systems, the focus was on (1) peer-based learning in school and (2) system-wide interactions focused on innovation and experimentation as the core driver for raising performance.

Interventions that were universal across all stages of improvement included (1) revising curriculum and standards, (2) ensuring an appropriate compensation structure for teachers and principals, (3) professional development, (4) assessing students, (5) establishing data systems, and (6) institutionalizing improvement through policy and education laws. The study explored leadership characteristics related to these interventions and found that an important skill for leaders of high performing systems is the ability to contextualize reform efforts to best fit within their system structure. This consideration included the pace of change as well as the level of teacher input in the desired change.

The McKinsey Report also addressed strategies that work to sustain these changes, citing three ways that improving systems do this. First, by establishing collaborative practices between

teachers and across schools; second, by establishing a mediating layer between the central system authority and local schools; and third, by internally developing leadership succession. Examples of collaborative practices include peer coaching, professional learning communities, and career paths for teachers.

### **Significance of Leadership**

In any organization, success is often dependent on the effectiveness of the leader (Drysedale, Goode, & Gurr, 2009). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has ushered in a whole new era of accountability pressures on schools and school leaders in particular (Portin, Alejano, Knapp, & Marzolf, 2006). Principals are at the forefront of these pressures and often bear the greatest responsibility for the school's status in relation to them (Elmore, 2005). The work of school leaders can significantly influence the success or failure of student learning in their schools (Blasé & Blasé, 1998; DeMoss, 2002; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). How leaders navigate these pressures and connect the work to improving classroom instruction and continuous school improvement can determine the long-term and sustained success of the school.

### **Level 5 Leadership Theory Applied to Schools**

An exploration of Level 5 leadership in schools should uncover important differences in what is common in reward schools as opposed to non-reward schools. Understanding that companies operate in a different environment than schools, we should examine the differences, for example, between public institutions and private sector organizations. The mere fact that the bottom line or some measure of profit may not be the central indicator of improvement in the

public sector (i.e. a school or district) should reveal important differences. While operational efficiency certainly plays into a private company's success, it may be an even more direct indicator of success in the public sector where any perceived "waste" is a failure. Furthermore, the political and policy environment that the public sector in general, and schools specifically face is indeed very different, particularly with respect to whom the Level 5 leaders truly are.

As noted earlier, Collins (2001) examined the leadership characteristics of the top CEO of the good-to-great companies. To be sure, there are other leadership roles in those companies, but Collins focused on how the top executive interacted with others in the company rather than detail the qualities of others. For the purpose of this study a key objective is to examine the leadership characteristics and qualities of the school building principal. Since the good-to-great "unit" in this research is the school, this makes more sense than looking beyond to the superintendent or to other leadership roles.

There is considerable research on school improvement at the K-12 level, much of which is focused on very low performing schools, not necessarily *reward schools* (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Nonetheless, some, if not many of the qualities of a Level 5 leader should be just as identifiable in a school setting as in industry. Characteristics of Level 5 school leaders could be said to be personality traits such as humility and modesty. Others are behaviors such as deflecting praise or accepting blame. A relentless focus on results in a school setting would involve the close monitoring of student learning data and related performance data. Likewise in regards to succession planning, setting up the next principal for success may mean implementing change at a level deep enough for it to continue. Too often, new educational leaders come in with their own "new initiative" and staff can become cynical when that new initiative departs as

quickly as that leader. Level 5 leaders in schools would be more likely to make changes that can survive the transition from one leader to the next.

One qualitative study that explored characteristics of principals in schools that have shown significant and sustained improvement was conducted by Gray and Streshly (2008), who interviewed 11 principals with six coming from schools that have sustained improvement and five from schools that have not. In this study, Gray and Streshly attempt to parallel what Collins explored in the qualities of CEOs of good-to-great companies. All 11 principals were from California schools and each school's success was measured by California's state test and a calculated Academic Performance Index (API). In this regard, the researchers parallel Collins' use of a single measure to define improvement. That being said, the authors do point out that although it is a common singular focus for modern schools, it is a narrow measure of success.

Gray and Streshly (2008) found that although there were important differences between schools and businesses, all of the elements of the Level 5 Leader were present in the principals of the highly effective schools, and less so in the principals of the comparison schools. It is noteworthy in this study that the authors do not make as clear a distinction between the highly effective and comparison schools. It seems many of the same elements were present in both, although to varying degrees as evidenced by their interviews with the principals. This may suggest that other factors beyond the principal may be important, and other methods beyond the principal's self-reflection may be informative in discovering further the factors of sustained school improvement.

While many of the Level 5 leadership characteristics may be applicable to effective leadership in schools, there are some important qualities that go beyond what Collins had found

in Level 5 leaders. One of the most critical of these is the ability to build relationships among faculty (Gray & Streshly, 2008). With the abundance of research to suggest that collaborative professional development and professional communities in schools impact student achievement, making sure there is time, support, and skilled facilitation in helping people work with each other is critical.

In addition, some of the clear differences between schools and the private sector may imply slight differences in how principals act on other key good-to-great strategies. The clearest example perhaps is that unlike businesses, students are not a “product.” That is to say, schools must respond to all of the individual and unique challenges each student brings to help them achieve at high levels. Schools also have different purposes than businesses, and instead of a focus on increasing profits and returns to investors, schools must respond to public and political responsibilities. To say it another way, schools are meant to enhance the collective interests, not the individual interests of stakeholders (Gray & Streshly, 2008). Sergiovanni (1996) detailed differences in leadership between the public and private sector by arguing “good leadership for corporations and other organizations...may not be good leadership for...social enterprises...Everything that happens in the schoolhouse has moral overtones that are virtually unmatched by other institutions in our society” (p. xii).

Other differences between schools and the private sector include structures for governance and consensus on the values of success. These differences also have implications for the Level 5 school leader (Gray & Streshly, 2008). Unlike the often unilateral power of a CEO, school principals operate within a district’s administrative structure, which is within the governance of an elected school board. Unlike the structure of a board of directors, school

boards are obligated by law to conduct their business in public. This distinction led Collins (2005) to argue that leaders within the public sector need to exercise more *legislative* leadership skill, as opposed to *executive*. This difference essentially means they need to be more skilled at the political side of decision-making. Another major difference is the value employees place on the measures of success. It would be odd to hear a company worker say “I don’t agree with profit” or “profit isn’t that important,” but it is common to hear teachers say “test scores aren’t that important” as they argue for other indicators of student success. This also means the Level 5 school leader must exercise that legislative leadership skill in working internally with faculty to build consensus on measures of success and goals for student learning.

In their study of school leadership with California principals, Gray and Streshly (2008) also made note of other qualities more universal to school leadership, that were equally present in leaders from highly effective and comparison schools. The three they cited are building and displaying trust, promoting participative governance and professional learning communities, and management by walking around. These qualities serve to effectively highlight the nature of schools today as particularly social institutions, which also may separate schools to some degree from the private sector. The leadership skills of principals are therefore heavily dependent on their ability to interact effectively with a variety of people and to help people build the skills to interact effectively together.

### **Growth in Teacher Quality**

While success in schools is dependent on the efforts of the collective, there is little doubt that the key component within that collective is the teacher working with students in the classroom. There is little argument in the research over the primacy of instructional quality as a

predictor of student success (Kaplan & Owings, 2004). In schools that sustain improvement in student learning, school leaders build systems to sustain growth in teacher quality (Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2001). This is often accomplished through job-embedded and sustained collaborative systems of professional development. These school leaders exhibit what Hallinger (2003, 2010) defined as *instructional leadership*. This practice of leadership keeps a clear focus on the core business of schools, which is teaching and learning. Studies have shown that this type of leadership is effective in raising student outcomes (Hallinger, 2010; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowel, 2008). The instructional leader, by definition, is connected to the day-to-day teaching and learning in the classroom. This is helpful not only in inspiring staff ownership, but also in leveraging efforts to the core of what will impact learning the most. As an instructional leader, the superior is one who walks the talk by not only communicating the importance of improvement in quality instruction, but also by developing systems to give teachers the time and structure to develop as professionals (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

### **Implications of High Stakes Testing for Level 5 Leaders**

The landscape for accountability in schools has shifted over the last decade with the implementation of No Child Left Behind, primarily focused on the expansion of high-stakes state assessment and related school sanctions. Some studies have found that those assessments have had little impact on student learning and have even had a negative effect on teaching practices (Faulkner & Cook, 2006; Amrein & Berliner, 2003). It would make sense, based on these findings, that teachers would have a negative perception of their corresponding state test and would see it as counter-productive in supporting effective teaching practices. These perceptions,

however, remain unexplored within the narrower set of schools that have improved steadily from “good” to “great” over the tenure of these assessments.

Many researchers have explored the effects high stakes testing have on various aspects of schools. While the effects of high stakes testing are complex, the greatest effect testing has had on schools is in the area of curriculum, specifically in the scope of the curriculum. In a qualitative metasynthesis of research including 49 studies, Au (2007) found substantial evidence of curricular narrowing to focus only on content tested. Digging deeper in an ethnographic study, Mora (2011) found similar evidence of narrowing in addition to teachers spending large amounts of time on test preparation. He went on to correlate these shifts with an increase in student boredom.

The shifts to a narrower curriculum have come at the expense of other core subjects, such as science and social studies, as well as subjects such as health, art, music, and physical education (Jones, 2008). The lack of emphasis some of these subjects have received has been controversial, especially in middle schools where the core educational philosophy is to offer a wide array of experiences for students to explore their world and begin to pursue personal interests (Musoleno & White, 2010). While those effects are generally perceived as negative, some have seen a positive consequence in focusing the curriculum more specifically on state standards and student outcomes (Debard & Kubow, 2002; Jones & Egley, 2004). In the end, whether the effects of narrowing are positive or negative depends on the values and goals aspired to by the school. The expansion of high stakes testing seems to have brought into question for some whether the values and goals of their school match the values and goals of the policy environment in which they are situated (Diamond, 2007).



While research has generally found a larger effect of high stakes testing on content than pedagogy, studies have also documented shifts in the instructional practices teachers employ as a result of these tests (Dunlap, Sturtevant & White, 2003; Diamond, 2007; Jones, 2008). In their survey of middle school teaching practices, Musoleno and White (2010) found that after implementation of NCLB in 2002, there was a substantial decrease in the percentage of teachers using developmentally appropriate instructional practices. Again, specific to middle schools, Cook and Faulkner (2006) found using the Middle School Concept Implementation Survey (MSCIS) that most teacher respondents felt that state assessment mandates had negatively affected their selection of hands-on instructional strategies and the use of instructional time.

In a longitudinal study of preservice and beginning teachers, Dunlap, Sturtevant, and White (2003) found that preservice teachers often experienced a high degree of contradiction between what they learned in their teacher preparation programs and what they experienced in their first years teaching when it came to instructional strategies and use of instructional time. As an example, teachers found that being forced to use strict pacing guides interfered with their focus on the varying needs of students. These differences speak to the perception many teachers have that high stakes tests are, at best, a distraction from effective teaching and authentic curriculum, and, at worst, an undermining of the purpose, values, and goals of education itself.

While most of these research findings speak to a disconnect between the purpose of high stakes testing and what teachers perceive to be the purpose of schools in respect to curriculum and instruction, few studies have explored how these contradictions may be more or less pronounced in different socio-economic settings or among schools with different achievement levels. For example, studies have found that test preparation practices vary according to levels

of achievement in schools, with higher achieving schools spending less time in strict and explicit test preparation with their students (Lipman, 2002; Diamond & Spillane, 2004). Contrary to that, Lai and Waltman (2008) found no difference in time for test preparation among schools of different achievement levels.

While comparisons across achievement levels on high stakes testing are less prevalent in the research, there are even fewer studies that explore the effects of high stakes testing among schools that have steadily improved over a longitudinal period from high achieving to even higher achieving. This area warrants further research in the perception educators have of the role high stakes testing has played in influencing that achievement.

### **Teacher Perceptions and Efficacy**

Bandura (1977) constructed the theoretical framework of efficacy in his social learning theory, and researchers have applied that construct to the development of collective teacher efficacy (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). According to Bandura, leadership practices can have a significant impact on this development and the presence of collective teacher efficacy. Bandura and Locke (2003) explained that efficacy beliefs can affect teacher dispositions in positive or negative ways and influence how well people persevere in the face of difficulties. Murrell, Diez, Fieman-Nemser, & Schussler (2010) describe teacher dispositions as morally-driven habits of professional practice. Teacher beliefs about student learning and the abilities of students to learn will affect how they approach teaching. This may be an important point to consider in light of the accountability pressures and resulting instructional decisions teachers are or are not allowed to make.

The challenges teachers face to grow in their practice and continuously improve may be limited by narrow approaches to curriculum and instruction. In a study of middle and high school English and Social Studies teachers in New York City schools, Crocco and Costigan (2007) found that teachers felt their professional identity, creativity, and ability to forge relationships with students were all diminished as a result of curricular and pedagogical impositions of scripted lessons, mandated curriculum, and narrowed options for pedagogy. A four-year longitudinal study of three high-poverty elementary schools in a high-functioning school district found that high-stakes accountability had a “corrosive” influence on teaching and learning (Valli, Croninger, Chambliss, Graeber, & Buese, 2008). Further, the same researchers found that there was a “deterioration of teaching” between the years 2002 and 2005 as a result of a focus on testing and test preparation (Valli & Buese 2007).

Strict federal policies, Nieto (2009) warns, could be seriously damaging to the teaching profession. Teaching has changed so dramatically under the policies related to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) that the morally attractive features of teaching, he argues, are vanishing. Many teachers are now leaving the profession because the ideals that brought them to teaching are fast disappearing. Nieto’s concern is further confirmed in Santoro’s (2011) work on retention of high-quality teachers, which found that experienced teachers leave the profession when they view their work as a forced mismatch with their ideals. Other empirical studies have shown that teacher retention is related to a sense of success, with the most qualified teachers leaving when they do not see themselves as efficacious (Johnson & Birkeland 2003).

As schools have continued to navigate NCLB and Race to the Top, the lack of success with students has not just been limited to a teacher’s self-perception, it has also become much

more public. Further, this sense among teachers is characterized more by a mismatch between what they perceive as quality teaching and the values of the external forces of accountability. Buckley, Schneider, and Shang (2005) suggest that NCLB has actually been working against improvement of the nation's stock of quality teachers due to the narrowing of curriculum, prescribed pedagogy, and the negative perception of working in schools labeled "in need of improvement" or "failing." For some teachers, it is difficult to sustain a sense of good teaching when policies are perceived as limiting opportunities to teach in ways that they believe are effective.

What the research on the relationship between teacher autonomy and teacher retention does not address is the context of classroom and school success, as shown by increased student achievement. Does that success have an effect on the retention of teachers? That is to say, does the retention issue exist to different degrees depending on the efficacy of the, albeit less autonomous, school improvement strategy? Santoro (2011) describes the pursuit of the "good work" in teaching as work in which educators find purpose and self-efficacy. There is not as much attention in the research given to how demoralization is or is not prevalent in school conditions that have limited teacher autonomy but have increased student outcomes. These more complex scenarios may shed greater light onto the underlying school culture and the differences some schools may exhibit given the same top-down federal mandates. In any case, positive collective efficacy seems an important factor in sustaining continuous improvement. When teachers exhibit collective efficacy in schools they can plan and implement what is necessary to have a positive effect on student learning (Goddard, Hoy, Woolfolk-Hoy, 2004). How Level 5 school leaders message the changes implied by external mandates may play a critical role in how teachers view the moral component of those changes.

## **Organizational Improvement**

Improving the performance of a single classroom teacher is one thing. Improving the performance of a whole school is quite another, and implies the need for a broader, more comprehensive, yet more focused vision and plan for action. Focus can be achieved by setting and monitoring goals, which is a critical step in continuous school improvement (Wohlstetter, Datnow, & Park, 2008). Researchers have also identified a positive correlation between the establishment and communication of the school vision, definition of the school mission or goals, and academic achievement (Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003). This dimension of direction-setting was also identified by Marzano, Waters, & McNulty (2005) in their meta-analysis as a critical link between academic achievement and school leadership. How Level 5 school leaders help establish vision, inclusively define goals, and monitor progress, determines the extent to which these improvements will lead to what Collins (2001) calls “the flywheel effect.”

Transitioning goal-setting into collective action requires the coordination of many to work collaboratively with a common sense of purpose and ability to measure progress and identify success. Researchers have explored the nature of these professional interactions and the role leaders play in fostering a professional community. In a quantitative study surveying teachers about the level of trust perceived in relation to their school leaders, Tschannen-Moran (2009) found a strong correlation between the leadership orientation of the principal and the level of professional collaboration within the teaching staff. That is to say, principals who modeled a professional orientation and actively cultivated greater trust by allowing teachers greater professional discretion were found to cultivate greater professionalism in the behavior of their teachers.

Research also points to the importance of district level leadership, in conjunction with school level leadership, as having a positive impact on student learning and school improvement. One of the key findings of a meta-analysis done by Marzano & Waters (2006) was that superintendents engaged with other leaders in collaborative goal setting, and the creation of non-negotiable goals for student achievement and instruction, led to significant increases in student achievement. Interestingly, this analysis also found that a thoughtful balance of district level leadership with building level autonomy was significant.

Researchers concluded from this finding that effective superintendents may provide principals with “defined autonomy.” That is, they may set clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, yet provide school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority for determining how to meet those goals (p. 4).

This defined autonomy speaks to an understanding on the part of the principal and the superintendent on what decisions are to be made at the district level and what decisions are to be made at the building level.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Burns (1978) pioneered the study of *Transformational leadership*, developing the construct of the *transforming* leader and the *transactional* leader. According to Burns, transforming leadership is morally-driven and characterized by highly charismatic leaders who motivate and inspire their followers to improve the social structures in which they live. This leadership is contrasted by Burns with transactional leadership, which is based on a more “give and take” relationship and is not meant to change the social structure or organizational system.

Burns focused primarily on political leaders to describe these styles. Bass (1990) expanded on Burns' work to establish the characteristics of Transformational and transactional leadership in organizations and businesses through employer and employee relationships. Bass notes that "Superior leadership performance-Transformational leadership- occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interests for the good of the group" (p. 21). Through surveys and clinical case evidence, Bass distilled Transformational leadership into four major characteristics: charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. These leaders are actively engaged in the development of their followers as well as the development of the organization. They establish trusting relationships, communicate high expectations guided by a clear vision, and promote intellectual advancement through creative problem solving (Bass, 1990).

The literature contains many references to the need for Transformational leadership in order to meet the changing landscape of school improvement. Leithwood (1992) has done extensive research in applying the construct of Transformational leadership to the school setting. His study of schools engaged in meaningful reform and improvement found that leaders in those schools generally focused on three fundamental goals: (1) establishing a collaborative culture; (2) developing the instructional capacity of teachers; and (3) developing the collective capacity of teachers to solve problems. The Transformational leader by definition is equipped to adapt to multiple challenges and lead the organization to improvement in the face of adversity (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Wang, 2011). Significantly, what is common in all definitions of Transformational leadership is the leader's ability to positively influence organizational members' commitment and engagement in meeting goals, and capacity to meet them (Leithwood

& Jantzi, 2006; Marks & Printy, 2003). The effect of a Transformational leader is to build capacity to adapt as organizational members find they can accomplish more than they originally expected and often even more than they thought possible, resulting in extra effort and greater productivity (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Research around Transformational leadership in education has been associated with stimulation of innovation (Geijsel, Sleegers, Van den Berg, & Kelchtermans, 2001; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008) and changed teacher practices (Geijsel, Sleegers, Stoel, & Kruger, 2009). As teachers build collective efficacy to adapt to new challenges they contribute greatly to organizational learning (Silins, Mulford, & Zarins, 2002). This flywheel effect helps sustain organizational commitment and extra effort for change in a variety of international settings (Nguni, Sleegers, & Denessen, 2006; Ross & Gray, 2006).

### **Time to Improve**

Darling-Hammond (2010) notes that the use of time in many leading countries looks very different than here in the U.S. Teachers in high-achieving countries typically spend forty to sixty percent of their time preparing and learning to teach well. That far outweighs the little time American teachers have, which averages between three to five hours weekly. In many places, educational leaders will need to convince school boards and communities of the value in shifting time in such dramatic ways, adding one more layer to the complexity of leading this work. As Darling-Hammond (2010) points out in examples from high-performing countries, the equation is not as simple as more instructional time equals more student learning. More student learning has everything to do with quality instructional time and quality teaching.



One example of collaborative professional development that leads to continuous improvement is Japanese Lesson Study. This process involves teachers working in small groups to collaboratively craft and prepare a single model lesson. They work within the framework of an all-encompassing goal or set of goals and a focusing research question. They then observe a member teach the lesson and debrief the success of the lesson. Researchers have found this practice has a positive impact in knowledge and pedagogy for graduate students in teaching (Alvine, Judson, Schein, & Yoshida, 2007). What lesson study does is make the improvement of teaching everyone's responsibility. This collective focus on improvement links to the flywheel effect mentioned by Collins (2001). Lesson study is consistent with the parameters of effective professional development and participants report that the process helps identify and investigate challenging areas of instruction and, through collaborative inquiry, develop and test potential solutions (Audette, 2004).

Lesson study gained attention worldwide after the 1999 Third International Math and Science Study. Part of that study involved researchers bringing ethnographic accounts of lesson study to a broad public audience, commending the method of professional development for building a knowledge base for instruction and for improving teaching and learning (Lewis, 2009). Lessons that teachers collaboratively develop are called "research lessons" and consist of one teacher teaching the collaboratively developed lesson while the other teachers observe and collect data on the teaching and learning demonstrated. Lesson study has been shown to impact more than just teacher knowledge and practice, but also their dispositions. These include such characteristics as motivation to improve, curiosity, personal identity as a researcher, and a belief that a change in one's instruction can bring about improvements in student learning (Lewis, 2009).

Beyond lesson study, collaborative time for teachers has also been shown to be a factor in the success of model U.S. schools. Brown and Thomas (2000) point out in their case study of Wheeler Elementary School, a model Professional Development School (PDS), that collaborative time is a primary priority in the allocation of resources. A commitment to common planning time is an essential ingredient of the Wheeler PDS model. The teaching teams have 200 minutes of common planning a week scheduled during the instructional day. This common time provides daily opportunities for focused conversation on the work of the team and refining the art of teaching. As Wheeler shows, the ability to sustain quality job-embedded professional development is dependent on setting it as a priority in scheduling and school structure.

### **Professional Development and Organizational Learning**

In looking at the effects professional development focused on collaborative inquiry can have on teacher and organizational learning, it is important to consider them in comparison to the absence of effective collaboration or teaching and learning in isolation. Hadar and Brody (2010) found that while traditional professional development programs deemphasize interaction among participants, building communities of learners helps broaden perspective and expand effective practices. “Learning and intellectual functioning are enhanced through social interaction rather than individual intellectual efforts” (p. 1642). Professional development is most effective when it is designed around organizational growth, rather than just individual teacher growth. Researchers have found that building a culture of collaborative inquiry is key in that process (McDamis, 2007).

Teaching is complex work and increasing teachers’ effectiveness is less about memorizing scripts and routines and more about refining the contextualized decision-making

process to meet the shifting needs of a variety of students in the classroom. Professional development should therefore support an inquiry-based approach and teacher reflection. Butler and Schnellert (2012) found significant levels of teacher learning and changes in instructional practice through goal-directed cycles of inquiry. These changes in instructional practice have been shown to increase student learning as cycles of inquiry lead to authentic instruction. Dennis and O'Hair (2010) define authentic instruction as the combination of instruction and assessment that is designed to bolster student achievement through lessons which are taught at a higher intellectual level and ask students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. They go on to report that collaboration among teachers is one of the key elements in developing more comprehensive use of authentic instruction.

As teachers commit sustained amounts of time in cycles of reflection focused on evidence of student learning, they develop practices to better meet the needs of students in those areas. Scott and Bagaka (2004) studied change in passage rates for students on state assessments in math and reading and found a significant increase in those scores in schools with focused professional development and teacher collaboration. These cycles have recurring benefits as the knowledge base grows and teachers engage in a cycle of continuous improvement.

A systems approach to building effective teams and collective responsibility in schools means shifting schools from models of isolated teacher practice to more collaborative practice focused on collective inquiry and continuous improvement. The changes created are adaptive in the face of adversity. How teachers collaborate to push the groups' thinking beyond that of any individual and open up opportunities to adapt to more challenging situations is a major factor in accomplishing what Argyris (1976) refers to as double-loop learning. This kind of

organizational learning not only leads to individual adaptation, but also the organization's ability to achieve results previously thought unattainable.

In this model, the teacher's role shifts with a focus on collaborative inquiry from a recipient of information to a developer of new knowledge (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Further, Nelson (2008) noted, "When teachers generate knowledge of value beyond their individual classrooms, they contribute to a professional knowledge base that is available for peer review and use" (p. 550). In addition, they found that a combination of professional learning communities and collaborative inquiry could lead to Transformational change. Chenoweth (2009) also noted that in high-achieving high-poverty schools, breaking the cycle of teacher isolation and establishing structures for meaningful collaboration of teachers was essential in achieving high levels of student learning. The promise for this kind of change is only achieved through deliberate and sustained attention to the development of this collaboration.

The development of professional learning communities (PLCs) has become a central strategy for schools to enhance organizational capacity and improve results (Dufour, 2004; Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008). Collaboration associated with a professional community of teachers has been found to be a key element in successful schools and contributes to greater collective responsibility for school improvement and student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Newman and Wehlage (1995) found that professional learning communities had a positive impact on student achievement, stating that:

Organizational capacity is enhanced when schools are shaped into professional communities. Just as authentic achievement provides a vision to inspire student learning

of high intellectual quality, an image of the school as a professional community can help cultivate organizational capacity (p. 30).

As Fullan (2001) notes, leaders play a critical role in creating conditions that value learning as both an individual and collective good. By building more effective structures for collaboration, principals can move from a practice of isolation to a practice of collective reflection on improvement.

This declaration of the responsibility of leadership is also supported by Learning Forward (2011), formerly the National Staff Development Council, in their Standards for Professional Learning. These standards highlight the responsibility of educational leadership to develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning. Of course, this leadership is complex work. Fullan (2001) goes on to note that leading in a shifting policy environment means creating more than a structure, but a culture of change. Rather than adopting innovations, one after another, it means producing the capacity to constantly seek, critically assess, and selectively incorporate new ideas and practices inside the organization as well as outside of it. This balance of empowering people and building their capacity to adapt is perhaps the best guard against the possible cynicism of the next “new” thing.

Other researchers support the finding that leaders must establish the conditions for effective collaboration in schools through team development, setting meaningful student learning goals, and developing authentic student assessments and structures to monitor student progress (Dufour, 2004; Dufour et al., 2008; Schmoker, 2004; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). The key to building and supporting these structures in ways that truly impact continuous improvement lies in focusing on deep implementation (Marzano, 2003; Fullan, 2008; Reeves, 2009). This means

that teams are doing more than just going through the paces. They are collaborating together on common goals for which they are mutually accountable, not just working alongside each other (Dufour, et al., 2008).

## **Conclusion**

To summarize, school improvement is a complex process that requires intentional strategies involving a variety of stakeholders. The effects of these strategies are influenced by the context of the school improvement effort, including the particular stage of development in which the school may be. In other words, whether a school is trying to go from *poor* to *fair* or from *good* to *great* is significant when considering what improvement strategy to use for the greatest leverage. Level 5 leaders, as defined by Collins (2001) are particularly well suited to leading a company from *good* to *great*. Gray and Streshly (2008) found many parallels in leadership characteristics of highly successful principals in California.

The Level 5 leader shares many characteristics with the *Transformational leader* as conceived by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) and as applied to schools by Leithwood (1992). Through this literature, it is possible to develop the theoretical and conceptual framework to guide the exploration of this study with *reward schools* and reward school principals. The chart that follows traces the parallels between the Level 5 Leader, the Transformational leadership characteristics in general, and the Transformational leadership characteristics as applied to schools.

**Table 2.1: Level 5 Leadership and Transformational Leadership Framework**

<b>Good to Great Level 5 Leader (Collins)</b>	<b>Transformational Leader (Burns and Bass)</b>	<b>School Application (Leithwood)</b>
Communicates mission and purpose (Hedgehog concept)	Mission-driven Morally-driven	Develops widely shared vision Builds consensus on school goals
Identifies and develops talent (first who, then what)	Intellectual stimulation	Provides stimulating professional development
	Individualized consideration	Provides individual teacher support
Personal humility Professional will	Charismatic/Idealized influence Inspiration	Modeling behavior Motivates teachers/inspirational
Confronts the “brutal facts”	Communicates high expectations	High teacher performance expectations
Promotes a culture of discipline	Instills pride	Promotes positive school culture
Results-driven		Clear focus on student learning
Sets successor up for success	Respectful and trusting	Builds collaborative structures and capacity
Uses technology to accelerate progress		Focus on instructional quality

All of these qualities exist within the context of a school, which is within the context of a community. How each of these attributes is applied will be dependent on the particular strengths, needs, and culture of the given school. The effective Level 5 school leader will need to have situational awareness of their particular school setting to best leverage each strategy. How that leader engages the staff in a collective sense of purpose tied to a common vision will influence greatly what is seen by staff as most critical and valuable in student learning.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to examine the contributing factors of school improvement in schools that have shown sustained improvement in student achievement. In particular, the study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. How do the perceived enabling factors for school improvement by teachers and administrators in identified Reward Schools compare with Collins' good-to-great framework?
2. How do the indicators of success that are most valued by teachers and administrators in these schools compare with the indicators that define their identified status as great (i.e., a Reward School)?
3. How do the characteristics of the leadership in schools that have been designated as *Reward Schools* compare with Collins' construct of Level 5 Leadership?

Given the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the theoretical framework, a qualitative case study design was completed. This chapter describes the study's research methodology and addresses the following areas: (a) rationale for research approach, (b) research setting and context, (c) research sample, (d) data sources, (e) data collection methods, (f) data analysis methods, (g) issues of trustworthiness, (h) limitations and delimitations, and (i) summary.



## Research Design

Denzin & Lincoln (2011) define qualitative research in terms of the researcher's position in observing the world and examining the meaning people bring to natural experiences. In this approach, the researcher is not a direct participant in those experiences, but rather a conduit to gather meaning from them. Creswell (2013) expands on this definition to consider the use of interpretive or theoretical frameworks to inform the study of research problems. In this method, the researcher begins with assumptions embedded in that framework and then seeks the meanings participants ascribe to the research problem or issue. In this method, data is collected in a natural setting and inductive and deductive analyses are used to examine themes or patterns, which are then considered in light of the theoretical framework as a contribution to the literature or a call for change.

Because this study was focused on the application of Collins' theoretical good-to-great framework, the qualitative design used followed Creswell's definition and approach. The role of the researcher was to be able to gather data in the natural setting of the school in such a way that did not impose a framework for improvement, but rather examines through surveys, documents, and interviews the perceived operational factors for improvement to then analyze in light of Collins' framework, with a particular focus on leadership.

Creswell (2013) describes five approaches to qualitative research and defines case study as an approach where the researcher investigates a real-life, contemporary *bounded system*, or case, or multiple cases, through an in-depth data collection process using multiple sources of data. In this study, a case approach was taken to examine more than one context of, or site for, school improvement. Yin (2014) identifies case study as most appropriate when addressing "how" or "why" questions as a way to dig deeper into the context and contributing factors

surrounding an issue. This study followed a holistic case study design as outlined by Yin (2014) since the same theoretical framework was applied across all subgroups within the case.

### **Research Setting and Context**

This case study explored the leadership within the school context of an identified *Reward School*. Finding a match in the realm of school improvement to what Collins (2001) found in *Good to Great* is no simple task. Schools are defined as “award winning” for a variety of reasons. Often times these distinctions come through a rigorous application and identification process (i.e. Blue Ribbon Schools), but rarely are these designations based on a consistent analysis of a particular student learning measurement across all schools in the state. What makes reward schools different is that the same metric, student growth percentile, is applied to all schools in the state and schools are chosen because of their relatively high performance compared to their peers. This method mirrors, albeit on a shorter timeframe, what Collins had measured in regard to a single data point for business performance and growth over time.

The setting and context are important considerations in this study also since the school within the selected sample is situated in the current educational policy environment. That is to say, their identification as a continuously improving Reward School creates a direct link to the current adaptation of the No Child Left Behind (2001) federal policy represented in the ESEA Flexibility (2012) waiver request by the New Hampshire Department of Education. This context was important in allowing for a deeper analysis of the connection between “greatness” defined by this policy and “greatness” defined by the school community. It is integral to this study to explore the values related to this *externally imposed* measure of “greatness” as opposed to a partially self-selected award designation.

Also important about this setting is that this is a Title I identified school. By definition, Title I schools have relatively high percentages of students with low socioeconomic status as defined by their eligibility for free and reduced lunch. This is significant because of the widely accepted connection of student achievement with socioeconomic status and the tendency to attribute a school's achievement to the demographic makeup of the student population. In this study, the chosen school did not represent the highest levels of socioeconomic status, compelling a need to dig deeper to find other factors for their success. In fact, the school had a relatively high percentage of free and reduced lunch eligible students (51%) as compared to the New Hampshire average as well as to other Reward Schools. Again, this setting provided an opportunity to enlighten the conversation about school improvement and excellence in education for a broader representation of schools.

In a more general sense, the setting of this study was limited to schools in New Hampshire since many of the policy and accountability decisions are still very state-specific, making it difficult to identify schools along the same exact improvement path across states. These sample of schools only included elementary and middle schools by virtue of the fact that no high schools in New Hampshire met the criteria to be identified as Reward Schools given the rigorous methodology for the selection of these schools.

### **Research Sample and Data Sources**

The school included in this study was chosen using a selection process starting with the Reward School Methodology defined by the State of New Hampshire Department of Education, and then subsequently followed by the application of certain demographic filters as criteria. These filters included overall size and percent of free and reduced lunch eligibility. This ensured the chosen case was a medium or large school with a diverse socioeconomic student population.

Yin (2014) recommends a screening process in case study designs rather than sampling logic. This is an appropriate selection method in this study since the school selected needed to meet very particular selection criteria in the first instance, and then selection criteria was applied to easily produce a critical case.

The New Hampshire Department of Education (NH DOE) received a flexibility waiver from the United States Department of Education concerning the school improvement accountability requirements of No Child Left Behind. Part of the federal guidance in the waiver opportunity was to identify Reward Schools, while still focusing state school improvement resources on the lowest performing schools, identified as Priority Schools and Focus Schools. This is to say, the state was to focus even more intently on supporting the lowest performing schools, but should at least acknowledge the presence of schools with sustained improvement. While there is no financial gain or other connection to school improvement policy with these schools, they are at least identified through this process.

The NH DOE has developed a methodology that considers schools with the greatest gains in composite Median Student Growth Percentile in Reading and Mathematics based on the most recent three years of NECAP results. A full explanation of the methodology can be found in Appendix F. Through this methodology, New Hampshire has selected eight elementary and middle schools to be Reward Schools. To these eight, the researcher applied additional selection criteria by selecting the schools with over 30% free and reduced lunch and with at least 100 students enrolled. The 30% minimum free and reduced lunch population further strengthens the case design to eliminate the assumed effect of high socioeconomic status, and the minimum school population of 100 helps control for a case with a tested population of a school to be too small to be significant. By applying these criteria, the selection process produced a critical case.

Interestingly, another year's worth of student achievement data has become available since the identification of these schools. While improvement has continued in some places, it has stagnated or regressed slightly in others. This provided an opportunity for further insight in a critical case that has sustained improvement even after their reward designation.

Sources of data for this study included school improvement related documents, surveys of staff members, and interviews of administrators and staff members. Documentation included written mission or vision statements, data from the Department of Education and school websites, an application for the New Hampshire Excellence in Education or "EDies" award, and a specific document on ideal qualities of a graduate called *Image of a Graduate*. Surveys were designed to get a broader reflection from school staff members on the enabling factors for school improvement and success, particularly as they related to factors identified by Collins. Of all data sources, interviews were the most prominent and critical. This was due to the value of interviews to get to the meaning participants were making of the research problem, or in this case the school improvement efforts. Yin (2014) points out that interviews in case study research should resemble guided conversations rather than a highly structured process. The fluidity of this does not mean that they were not focused. Yin refers to this type of interview as an "intense interview" because the interviewer guides the interviewee through greater depths of meaning making through a guided inquiry process.

Teacher and principal interviews informed each of the three research questions. In addition, surveys played a key role in getting a broader range of input into the enabling factors that lead to school success. Document analysis also informed what values are explicitly stated or implied in mission statements and beliefs. Document analysis also helped inform what factors are most critical in the improvement of teacher practice, for example in the EDies application.

The researcher limited the document analysis to a small set of documents most closely aligned with the research questions.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data was collected using multiple methods and triangulating techniques in the researcher's attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of the context of school improvement in the case. This strategy added rigor and depth to the study and findings, and helped in establishing corroborative evidence of the data obtained (Creswell, 2013). Creswell makes note of the need to gain access to various sources of data through formal or informal gatekeepers in the community or organization. In the case of the school in this study, that gatekeeper was determined to be the superintendent of schools first, and the school principal second. Upon gaining access to the school as a site, this study included the following four phases of data collection: document analysis, surveys, staff interviews and principal interviews.

#### **Phase 1: Document Analysis**

As an initial introduction to the school, the researcher analyzed documentation available that illuminated the image the school projected to itself and the community. This documentation included mission and vision statements, the school website, an application for an EDies award created by school staff, and school or district-produced reports. Much of this documentation was found on the web, but the researcher also inquired of the gatekeepers what documents may be available that would best represent what the school valued and promoted. This documentation included the report, *Image of a Graduate*, and helped further guide the interview process in phase three.

## Phase 2: Survey

The second phase of data collection included a survey for staff members in the school. The survey (Appendix E) was open-ended and intended to get broader input on what factors are perceived to have the greatest influence on raising student achievement. The survey was field tested with a set of teachers from another school prior to use to gain feedback and inform the reliability of the instrument. The survey was presented as not to be evaluative of staff or the school, a proposition made easier by the fact that this school has already achieved recognition. The survey was designed to elicit factors for improvement that may or may not have been in alignment with Collins' (2001) framework, and if these traits were not present, there may have been a theory of action operational in the school that brought greater success than Collins' framework would have. This data collection phase was intended to set up the next phase and provide a starting point for the conversations with teachers. The researcher attended a faculty meeting prior to administering the survey via SurveyMonkey to give an overview of the research study. The survey included a consent form and was returned by 17 out of 36 or about 47% of the teaching staff. The nature of the survey as an open-ended survey focused on the work of the school over the last five years may have contributed to a lower rate of return. Given the nature of the questions, any teacher who was new to the school in the last five years may have assumed they did not have enough experience at the school to complete it.

## Phase 3: Staff Interviews

The purpose of the staff interviews was to expand on the results of the survey and make meaning of them in light of the most influential factors for school improvement perceived by staff. These factors aligned with the survey more than they deviated from it. Questions were open-ended so as to encourage other offerings and reflections on the contributing factors for the

improvement of student achievement in the school. The staff interviews were conducted by the researcher within close time proximity to the survey so the survey information was fresh with participants. This timeframe was within two weeks. Three staff interviews were used.

Participants were solicited through the Principal with the criteria of longevity at the school and a mix of grade-level representation used. The staff interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

These staff interviews also allowed for exploration into what was most valued in student learning. Beyond the alignment of improvement levers with Collins' framework, the staff interviews allowed for discussion of what is most important for student learning in a "great" school to generate a conversation about the alignment of those values with the existing externally prescribed measures of greatness.

#### Phase 4: Principal Interviews

Principal interviews allowed the researcher to deeply explore the meaning school leadership made of the school improvement efforts. These semi-structured interviews explored what the principal valued in regard to student learning in a "great" school. In order to delve deeply into the construct of Level 5 Leadership, interviews with the principals were structured differently. The researcher used Seidman's (2013) Phenomenological Interviewing Method for these interviews. This method was designed to bolster validity of findings through a triangulation method of three successive interviews with the same participant. Each interview was approximately 70 minutes. The first interview focused on the individual's journey related to the issue at hand. In this study, that translated to the principal's own personal journey related to leadership and school leadership in particular. The purpose of this interview was to set the personal context for the principal's perspective on leadership. In the second interview, the



participant reflected on his current place and position in regard to the issue. In this study, that meant the principal reflected on his own current leadership style and strategies in relation to school improvement. This interview was also fairly open, but was guided to address the self-perceived role the principal has in school improvement. The third interview was structured to expand on the meaning made from the first two interviews and to validate the researcher's interpretation of the participant's views and perspective. The researcher chose to have a fourth interview with the principal because the third interview was cut short by about 30 minutes due to the Principal's schedule. The interviews occurred between seven and ten days apart. In this study, this interview series allowed the researcher to make explicit connections between the principal and Collins' (2001) construct of a Level 5 Leader as well as Transformational Leadership as defined by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) and applied to schools by Leithwood (2012)

At the conclusion of the four phases of data collection, the researcher had perspectives from various individuals on both the enabling factors for school improvement as well as the alignment of values and indicators of student learning. Further, multiple interview techniques and document analysis added depth to the analysis and strengthened credibility. This method facilitated a triangulation of findings in regard to the research questions.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

During the study, document analysis was used to examine the written record of the school's strategies for improvement and educational values. The analysis was meant to critically examine the document, its purpose, and how it was used. Document analysis was based on a) the person or persons involved in writing the document and their affiliation, b) the intended audience for whom the document was written, and their level of knowledge, c) the content of the

document as it related to the stated strategies for improvement or identification of educational values. Document analysis was used to corroborate and augment evidence from the other sources (Yin, 2014).

The survey was given to school staff members for the purpose of informing interviews. Questions on the survey were matched to the overarching research questions as well as the theoretical framework and data was used to provide descriptive data on perceived contributing factors of school improvement. Each survey response was placed in a data table.

The researcher interviewed each participant for approximately 60 minutes and recorded, through the use of an Echo Livescribe Smartpen, his or her responses to general questions pertaining to his or her involvement and experience with their school's improvement efforts. Participant answers were transcribed and analyzed. After the interviews, surveys, and document analysis were completed, the researcher conducted data, investigator, and theory triangulation. This method was designed to strengthen the construct validity of the case study by using data triangulation to develop convergent evidence (Yin, 2014). Through an approach of explanation building, the researcher compared the findings against the initial proposition. Second, the researcher revised the proposition based on that comparison.

The researcher used multiple coding methods to begin analyzing the data set. In vivo coding was used to lift from the data initial insights and phrases that were of interest. That is to say, there may be key phrases that keep coming up. Descriptive coding of documents and survey results helped inform interview questions, which then added to that data set. A semi-open coding process was used to start with a frame connected with the theoretical framework. Ultimately the researcher was looking for the enabling factors for success, the match between what's measured and what's valued, and the principal's role in leading that success. ATLAS.ti

software was used to organize codes and was useful in analyzing the data for major themes. By taking themes that arise out of the codes for the enabling factors, and themes of what is valued, the researcher was able to look deeply at the leadership role in both enabling and guiding that work.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations in qualitative theory studies include the relationship of this study to qualitative research, the quality of the process conducted during the research, the relationship with the participants, and the relationship to research integrity and data reporting (Miles & Huberman, 2014). The process involves analyzing the integration of this work into current research, being aware of potential harm or risks to participants, ensuring that the researcher provides informed consent, and lastly, providing confidentiality and privacy (Shaw, 2008). The participants had full information regarding the study and were given an estimate of the time involved. It was not anticipated that this study would do harm or have any risks to the participants. The relationships established with the participants were based on honesty and trust. Participants interviewed were asked to ensure a location for privacy during the interview to ensure that the information is confidential. The protection of the identity of the individuals and the organization studied was ensured through the use of pseudonyms. From an ethical perspective, it was also important to check back with the participants as to how information gathered was represented in the study.

Throughout the research process ethical considerations were addressed in a number of ways. Creswell (2013) notes multiple aspects of ethical considerations when doing qualitative research, including informed consent procedures, avoiding covert activities, and confidentiality toward participants. The purpose and design of the study was made known to participants as

well as assurances made through the informed consent process that no identities were used in reporting data from interviews. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and school-specific names. While the interview protocol was focused primarily on positive factors for school success, there was always the potential for respondents to disclose negative information. Although that did not occur to any great degree, it was important for all to know the strict confidentiality standards and ethical considerations throughout the research process.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

As Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) note, qualitative research entails issues of trustworthiness in slightly different ways than quantitative research. Whereas in quantitative research issues of *validity* and *reliability* are central, in qualitative research there are strong considerations of the parallel issues of *credibility* and *dependability*. Gaining *credibility* in this design means clarifying any bias of the researcher up front, engaging in substantial and sustained experience in the field, collecting from multiple sources of data, and corroborating any evidence across sources for triangulation. Equally important is exploring in depth any negative instances or contrary findings to round out a comprehensive picture of the issue.

In this study, it was important to explore with great objectivity the ascribed causal factors for sustained school improvement so as not to falsely assume a connection with Collins' (2001) framework or to force fit a school's success story into the established "good to great" narrative. In doing this, it was even more compelling to see what is different about these schools from Collins' theory. The researcher explored the factors for school improvement in great depth and detail to inform those findings.

Another element that could have impacted the credibility of the findings in this study is what Rosenzweig (2007) called the "Halo Effect." This is the tendency of people to ascribe

causes for success that are in reality products of success, or the notion that if one aspect of performance is going well, everything must be going well. To help reduce this effect, the researcher structured the data collection on hard evidence of success, rather than just stopping at the perception. For example, when interviews brought to light the shift in values of student learning represented in the reference to “the *image of a graduate*,” the researcher chose to include that document in the document analysis to be able to point to more concrete evidence.

Establishing *dependability* in this study meant providing a thorough record of data collection strategies. Making all data processes completely transparent helped establish a clear “audit trail” of the research design and methods. Additionally, establishing credibility in the data analysis process was accomplished through peer review of transcribed interviews and coded data. The researcher employed all of these strategies to establish credibility.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), *delimitations* clarify the boundaries of a study while *limitations* expose the conditions that may weaken the study. There are certain delimitations defined by the sample used in this study as related to the research questions. Given that, this study aimed to dig deep into the contributing factors that helped a school move from “good” to “great.” Good and great are relative terms and it would be difficult to get universal consensus on what defines a good or great school. By choosing the Reward School Methodology as the criteria for the selection of these schools, the researcher has assumed a definition of great that may not be universally accepted, or even fully accepted by the staff of the identified school. That being said, this methodology came the closest to paralleling Collins’ (2001) criteria in that, unlike other recognitions, it has no element of self-selection and is

based on an objective measure of learning. Indeed, the researcher's questions examined the connection between this identification and the values of greatness held by the school's staff.

Limitations in this study were primarily a result of the sample selection and potential researcher bias. In the sample selection process the researcher worked with school administration at the selected school site. Because the gatekeepers had knowledge and input over who these participants were, there was the potential for them to choose participants who represent a particular viewpoint in regard to school improvement strategies. To account for this the researcher was proactive in asking for participants who represented a broad range of views and roles within the school. Also, the researcher was aware of any bias that may have entered the analysis of interview data. For example, although the researcher placed great professional value on the process of collaboration among staff or skilled distributed leadership, a wide view was kept of the contributing factors for school success in the school even if they ran counter to that theory of change.

## **Summary**

In summary, this study proposed a qualitative case study methodology to explore the perceived and attributed factors for school improvement in schools that have been designated by the New Hampshire Department of Education as Reward Schools. These schools may parallel what Collins (2001) researched in *good to great* companies. The qualitative case study design allowed for an in-depth and context-rich analysis of the factors for school improvement. It was highly likely that these factors did not exist or operate in isolation. As a result, a research methodology that allowed deep analysis of potentially interwoven effects was essential.

The research sample was gained using the Reward School methodology by the New Hampshire Department of Education. From there, criterion-based sampling produced a critical

case design. Data was collected at the school site using surveys, document analysis, and interviews. Interviews themselves took place using two different interview methodologies. Teacher participants were interviewed using Creswell's (2013) semi-structured interview procedure, focusing on the factors enabling continuous improvement in student performance. In order to increase credibility in the comparison of the leadership of the principal to the construct of Level 5 Leadership, interviews with principals were structured differently. The researcher used Seidman's (2013) Phenomenological Interviewing Method for those interviews to gain greater depth and validity of findings. Interview data was transcribed and coded using in vivo and a semi-open coding structure, with the theoretical framework and key terms anchoring the coding structure. Data was analyzed to establish themes of school improvement factors and important contextual elements. All of these themes were woven into a narrative of school improvement for the selected case school and informed a discussion of comparison of this school and Collins' (2001) theoretical good-to-great framework, as well as the comparison of school leadership with Collins' Level 5 Leadership and Transformational Leadership as applied to schools.

## Chapter 4

### Presenting Results

“Qualitative data analysis requires the researcher to be patient and reflective in a process that strives to make sense of multiple data sources” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 135).

#### Introduction

This chapter will explore the findings from this study to relate this case to the theoretical framework of *reward school* leadership and perceived factors in sustaining high levels of continuous improvement in student achievement. Further, the findings will explore the alignment of expressed values in student learning with the perceived values inherent in the prescribed measures of student learning. This chapter will be presented in four parts. Part I will describe the research setting and context of the study. Part II will address the findings as they relate to the perceptions of teachers and administration in relation to the key strategies and conditions for the continuous high levels of improvement at the school. Findings from teacher surveys, teacher interviews, principal interviews, superintendent interviews, and document analysis will be examined to address the research question, *How do the perceived enabling factors for school improvement by teachers and administrators in identified Reward Schools compare with Collins’ good-to-great framework?* Findings will show that there is alignment between the teachers and the administration in relation to the major contributing factors for this improvement. Findings will also support alignment with Collins’ good-to-great framework in the areas of communicating mission and purpose (Hedgehog concept), confronting the “brutal facts,” promoting a culture of discipline, being results-driven, and setting a successor up for success. In addition to these aligned elements, findings will also suggest factors that are specific to the structure of schools. These findings will include the leveraging of public policy for school



improvement and the translation of external (national, state, district) initiatives through the values lens of the local school or specific case.

Part III of the findings will build on the communication of values by addressing the alignment of external measures for improvement (NECAP tests) with what is valued most in student learning. Again, multiple data sources will be included to examine the question, *How do the indicators of success that are most valued by teachers and administrators in these schools compare with the indicators that define their identified status as great (i.e., a Reward School)?* Findings in this section will detail the evolution of a conversation about priorities and values that develops from a performance imperative on one testing measure to a reflection on multiple indicators of success in student learning. Of particular interest in this section is the self-reflection on lower test scores and the school pride expressed in the “we’re better than that” sentiment on the part of teachers and administration, leading to the ongoing translation of school and district priorities through the lens of values in student learning. These finding will include document analysis of district-led work focusing on the “*image of a graduate.*”

Part IV of the findings will examine the characteristics of school leadership, particularly the school principal, as related to the characteristics embedded in the theoretical framework of Collins’ Level 5 Leader and the Transformational leader as described by Burns (1978) and Bass (1990), and applied to school leadership by Leithwood (1992) found at the end of Chapter 2. Teacher surveys, teacher interviews, and in-depth phenomenological interviews of the principal will be the major data sources and methods for addressing the question, *How do the characteristics of the leadership in schools that have met the criteria of a Reward School compare with Collins’ construct of Level 5 Leadership?* Findings will point to an alignment in areas of personal humility and professional will, as well as a disposition to “confront the brutal

facts.” Findings will also include alignment with elements of the Transformational leader, particularly in the areas of building consensus on school goals, providing stimulating professional development, modeling behavior, motivating teachers with high performance expectations, promoting a positive school culture, having a clear focus on student learning, building collaborative structures and capacity, and a focus on instructional quality. Findings in this case will further detail a high level of capacity for leadership to translate external or “top down” pressures within the context of teacher empowerment and local school values as a strategy for improving student learning.

### **Part I: Research Setting and Context**

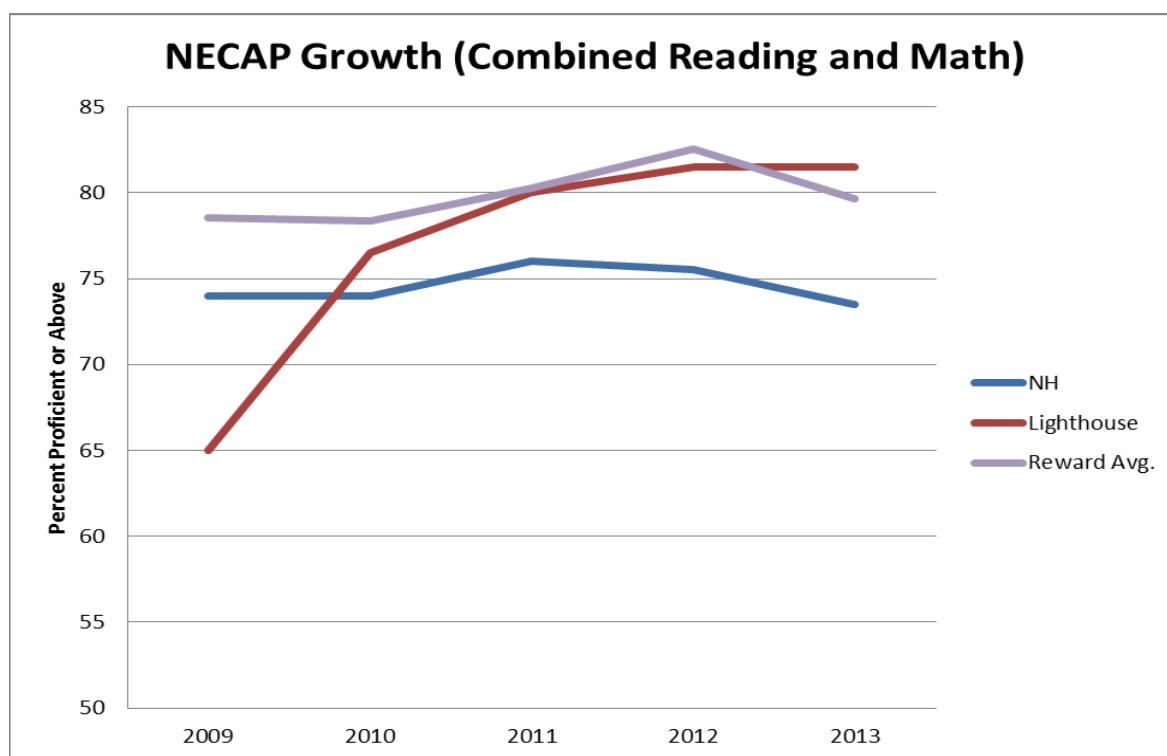
This is the story of a school on a deliberate improvement journey. The school that is the focus of this case study will be referred to as the Lighthouse School. The Lighthouse School is a K-8 elementary school in a School Administrative Unit (SAU) that is comprised of three separate districts. There are approximately 400 students at the school with 36 teachers and 23 support staff. The student population is made up of slightly over 50 % free and reduced lunch eligible students.

Like so many other schools in the last 15 years, Lighthouse has navigated school improvement efforts within the context of increased federal and state accountability mandates. No Child Left Behind (2001) ushered in an unprecedented era of test-focused accountability, with many New England states adopting the New England Comprehensive Assessment Program (NECAP) test. This test became the measure by which schools were judged “in need of improvement” (SINI) based on student performance as a whole, as well as performance in various subgroups such as special education students, low socioeconomic status students, and race. To avoid SINI status, schools needed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in all

subgroups as well as the whole population against proficiency targets that were continuously raised. Schools were inevitably faced not only with the challenge of keeping up, but also with the question of how this test aligned with what they valued most in student learning. How schools choose to respond amidst these external pressures to define and drive student learning can have a great influence on school improvement. This is the story of one school's response.

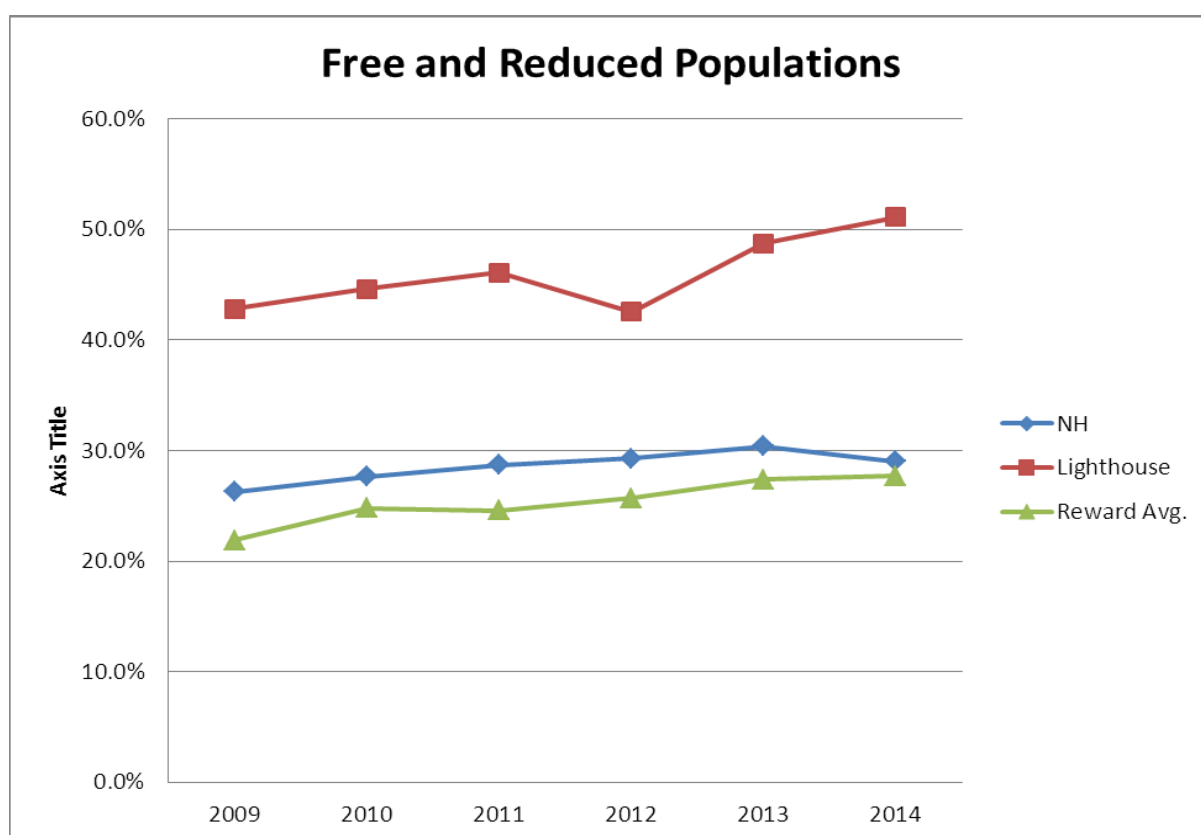
Lighthouse has made impressive gains on the state assessment for accountability. Figure 4.1 shows the growth of combined math and reading proficiency levels from 2009-2013 for Lighthouse, as compared to the state of New Hampshire as a whole, as well as to identified *reward schools*. These schools have all met the same criteria of three years of accelerated student growth on the NECAP test (see appendix F).

Figure 4.1 Lighthouse Comparison to State and Reward Average Combined NECAP Growth



What is also impressive about this growth in student learning is the fact that Lighthouse has seen a considerable increase in students eligible for free and reduced lunch over the same time period, as shown in Figure 4.2. As will be detailed further in the findings, the leadership and staff at Lighthouse have focused extensive efforts on building systems of support to help all students achieve at high levels.

Figure 4.2 Lighthouse Comparison to State and Reward Average Free and Reduced



The purpose of this case study was to explore the conditions and contributing factors that promote continuous improvement in student learning in a school meeting the criteria of a *Reward School*. These factors were framed around a theoretical framework that combined Collins' (2001) good-to-great framework with the construct of *Transformational* leadership as

applied to school leadership by Leithwood (1992). The case study methodology included surveys of teaching staff, interviews with three teachers, interviews with the principal, and document analysis. This data was then coded and analyzed with the use of the ATLAS.ti software program.

The primary participants in the study include the Principal, Mr. Beacon, three teachers (Mrs. Shore, Ms. Sandollar, and Mrs. Gull), and the Superintendent, Mr. Tide. All of the primary participants have been in the school or district for over five years. Mr. Beacon has been an administrator at the Lighthouse School for six years, the first three as Assistant Principal, and the last three as Principal. Prior to entering administration, Mr. Beacon was a middle/high school science teacher and coach. Mrs. Shore has been a teacher at multiple schools in the SAU for 33 years, serving as a classroom teacher and special education teacher before spending the last eight years as a reading specialist at Lighthouse. Ms. Sandollar has been a teacher for seven years, with all seven of those years being spent teaching sixth grade at Lighthouse. Mrs. Gull has been a seventh and eighth grade English/Language Arts teacher at Lighthouse for 16 years.

## **Part II: Improvement Factors**

### **Beginnings: Confronting the Challenge**

The story of improvement at Lighthouse is not a simple one. It begins with a narrow and strategic focus on one measure of student learning and expands into a multi-dimensional and more comprehensive look at systems within a school. The measures of success themselves have become part of an ongoing conversation that has led Lighthouse to a crossroads of sorts in school improvement. Thus, the factors for improvement are seen as strategic moves at key decision making points along the improvement journey.

Given that all staff were well aware of the improvements in NECAP scores over the previous four years, survey and interview questions were able to focus directly on the perceived enabling factors for this improvement. What is clear is that the journey of rapid improvement for Lighthouse started with the designation of District/School in Need of Improvement status (DINI/SINI). Survey participants were asked to respond to the following: *Your school has been recognized for impressive continuous growth in student learning. When and how did these improvements begin?* As one survey respondent said, “Being a DINI seemed to spark the need for focused intervention.” Another respondent mentioned that it “really began when we became a SINI school. We started looking at what could the school and district as a whole do to improve scores and academic rigor overall.”

Survey responses illuminated further that the student results that determined DINI/SINI status were not seen as representative of the level of learning students were actually experiencing. One respondent said:

If I backup, when we first started to do the NECAP, I think there was a general perception, maybe negative perception, about high-stakes testing. I think a lot of the staff kind of hoped it would go away so there was not a lot of energy when testing time came and as a result our scores were pretty dismal.

As another said, “These improvements began a number of years ago. Our students were not performing well on the NECAP. Our staff knew that our students were academically better than the test results were showing.” This mindset of “we’re better than the scores show” helped drive the initiative to take the assessment seriously. Teachers themselves identified a lack of investment in their peers when it came to the assessment. As one said on the survey:

When I first got here the test seemed like it was just a joke, “make it through the test and then move on.” Teachers needed to realize that the test was testing actual skills that students should have, regardless of how we do on the state tests.

This pressure to have the assessment reflect the true learning of students was expanded upon in the teacher interviews. Ms. Sandollar stated:

Well, year one when I was here there wasn’t much emphasis on the testing at all. That was my impression coming in as a first year teacher, it’s kinda like “oh we had to do this other test,” kind of a bother.

Mrs. Gull added:

Besides all of the good teaching and things that go on here, I think the big push was that for a long time, especially at the high school level, in this district they were just “yeah take the test whatever.” That came from the teachers and the administrators and everybody. So we decided as a district that we needed to turn this around as we were on the SINI list and that was heartbreaking.

The collective decision to take the test more seriously instead of trying to dismiss the results is a great example of what Collins (2001) refers to as “confronting the brutal facts” in his good-to-great framework. Teachers began to be more aware of how they communicate to students about the test. As Ms. Sandollar put it, “For me personally I hate standardized tests but I’m not gonna say that to the kids because I want them to do well on it because we have a lot hanging on our shoulders with that.”

While the recognition that the NECAP assessment was important and the perception that early results were not representative of actual student learning can be seen as the impetus to improve, the challenge Lighthouse then had to face was how to create more investment in the

assessment. By teachers' own admission, the lack of investment was present in students as well as staff. When asked what factors were most important in the school's improvement journey, most of the survey respondents mentioned organized efforts to highlight the importance of the assessment, teach strategies to maximize student performance, and instill confidence in students so they can be successful. There were multiple references to the "NECAP Pep Rally." As one survey response noted:

The whole school gathered in the gym and we literally had a pep rally to get the students motivated to do their best on the test. Administrators, teachers and paras all being on the same page and communicating to the students the importance of producing quality work on the test.

Another mentioned that the:

NECAP Rally put on by staff was to get everyone pumped for the test. Signs were put up around the school "Be Your Best on the Test!" I decorated my former students' lockers to get them pumped up. We as a staff wrote encouraging notes.

Ms. Sandollar explained:

We also did the NECAP pep rallies, I'm sure you heard some of that, and all the teachers would get involved with that. The ones that like to act would go and do little skits and even when we had administration change here, our Vice Principal became our principal, he gets up there and pretends to sing like he's some rock star. Kids really got pumped up for all that.

This strategy of turning what was a dreaded event into a celebrated event quickly took on a strategic focus. While the pep rallies and message of encouragement were focused on the whole population of students, a more strategic approach was taken with students who had



previously scored close to proficient, either right below or right above that mark. These students were called the “cusp students” and they were identified for additional encouragement. As one survey respondent said:

During our student testing in October we would do a whole NECAP rollout, showing students the right ways to prepare through a fun and dramatic show put on by the teaching staff. Many of us were given names of specific students to cheer on over the NECAP week and remind students that we are their biggest fans.

Another mentioned, “We identified all cusp students (students that were on the border of moving from a 2 to a 3 or at risk of moving down from a 3 to a 2) and assigned them coaches.” This strategy was further detailed in the teacher interviews. Ms. Sandollar put it this way:

We identified what we called cusp students, those ones that were one or two points away from going to the next level or possibly dropping to the next level. Then we all acted pretty much like cheer leaders. We were assigned a certain student, one or two students each of those cusp students. We’d really kind of, two weeks prior to our testing window, hang things on their locker, quotes of encouragement or meet with them. We’d tell them it’s a magic pencil and use this pencil, anything creative that the teachers could think of that they wanted to do they did and I think that made a difference as well, for those students that were kind of on the border of either dropping or pushing them just to go to that next level.

Similarly, Mrs. Gull stated:

The kids saw that we were pumped up, we were excited, we were gonna be great. We told them we believed in them but another thing we did was we identified what we call, I’m sure you heard this from others, the cusp students, kids who were right on the border.

Each one of them got their own personal cheerleader. I had my own cusp student and three or four days before I would put little notes in their locker, I would maybe put a little piece of candy, even though it's against the nutrition policy, we would do those kinds of things to let them know "come on you can do it."

Mrs. Shore noted the school wide effort included establishing themes and communicating to parents. She said:

So the first year our theme was "we are the champions" and we took that and we, all our staff got involved and we rewrote songs to "we are the champions of the world," you know "we are the NECAP champions." At the end of our pep rally we had fire trucks come and escort us around the building. That was usually on a Monday and we would start the test on a Tuesday. So there was a lot of excitement and buildup and newsletters went home to parents.

These strategies to increase motivation did not stop with just pumping students up before the test. A critical factor cited for continuing the improvements in scores year after year was the recognition of achievement when the scores came back. Ms Sandollar explained how the principal would focus the recognition, saying:

One year he came over the intercom our theme was, you know it's like the Rocky song, and all the sudden we're in class and all the sudden over the intercom the Rocky song is playing over the intercom and we were like "what's going on?" which the teachers kind of knew at that point but the kids are like "what's going on?." All of a sudden we all go outside and the whole entire school is running around the school led by the police and the fire trucks and then we all found out that that was our first year we made those really big gains. So it's really just kind of praising and changing that perspective of kids.

One survey respondent noted the staff and community embracing and becoming part of the school's success on the test:

Staff has been amazing "coaches" for their students during this assessment. Community has also embraced this. An example is that our local market and McDonalds donated healthy snacks for all our students during the week of testing. Our testing schedule moved from three weeks to three days because of a commitment of all staff to become actively involved.

Mrs. Gull offered the perspective that these strategies to shift the mindset of staff and students, and to turn things around with student performance, was accompanied by a shift in staff interactions. As she talked about the initial effects of the SINI designation on staff morale she noted:

And that was even more devastating because then people started pointing fingers at other people and we said we've got to do something, this is not okay and it's not good. That's when we started and we said okay wait a minute all right so we're on the list. Then we started brainstorming together as a faculty and coming up with the NECAP pep rally and the cusp students and all of this. We turned it around for ourselves. Then we said to each other "you know what we know, we are good at what we do, now we have to prove it to everybody else." Maybe it was that that drove us, that "you know what, you can call us a school in need of improvement but we're better than that." So maybe it was a little bit of that you know "I don't think so" attitude. Maybe, I think maybe for me it was. I think a little bit of that you know "we'll show you." So we got very very good at it. The kids look forward to it. They took it seriously and you have run the numbers so you know the data. So I think that was a contributing factor.

The shift in mindset for students was further explained by Ms. Sandollar:

We had kids who hated testing say “I love testing it’s great. I can just sit here and go to these pep rallies and I get treats and I get this and I get that.” So it started at that point changing the minds of those kids to that this is something really fun. So kind of the perspective on things changed for the teachers and then it started to change for the students. As we took ownership of how important it was the students then took ownership of how important it was for them to do their part.

In addition to encouragement before the assessment, students had incentives to persist and give their best effort throughout the test. Mrs. Shore explained that:

So there was no drawing, there was no reading, there was nothing. Because what we worried about finishes everybody sees that person done you know in the beginning it was tough but in the third and fourth year the students knew that that was the expectation. And you could just see the pacing of the test-taking became different and along with that same kind of thing we created incentives per grade level and we let the grade levels decide what their incentive would be. So for the third or fourth or fifth grade, teachers worked with the students to decide and the decision was made based on their work ethic so if it appeared they were working hard and not just circling, that they were giving it their best effort, you know they might get a sticker for the day or a checkmark for a day. After the testing setting they might end up having I don’t know movie and popcorn or something not huge but enough to say “job well done.” That, especially for middle schoolers, was so important, for the seventh and eighth graders just to keep them sustaining and you know given the fact that students say “are we gonna be graded for this?” In all honesty, but we used a lot of dialogue about “you’re not necessarily going to

get a grade but this is an overall picture about how you're performing at this level so it's really important that you give it your best work." It was very rare that we had students at any grade level that didn't make their incentive.

### **Bringing a Systems Perspective**

The efforts at Lighthouse to improve student performance on the NECAP assessment did not stop with creating more ownership with staff and motivating students to try their hardest. Other strategies were employed as the principal and staff started to examine systems related to student achievement on the assessment and other aspects of the testing environment. One of these efforts involved training for active proctoring as opposed to passively observing students taking the test. While teachers were clear not to influence or monitor any actual answers students were giving, they took an active role in encouraging them to persist through the test block. One survey respondent explained by saying, "We knew that our staff would need to become very ACTIVE proctors. They would need to circulate, monitor, and coach their students through the process. We did a great deal of training in this area." Mrs. Shore described the connection to teacher investment:

Another thing that we did was shift the thinking of our proctors from, you know as I said the staff was praying it would go away, to the fact that this is not going away. This is very important in terms of measurement of how our students are doing comparatively. We did lots and lots of training for our proctors and we really talked about the way they viewed the test is going to be parallel to the way their students are going to view this test. So we called it active proctoring and there was no more correcting papers and there was no more sitting behind a computer and that during that whole window you will be up moving, almost like a coach, you're kind of like "good job," "you're doing well." It

created that whole setting and I think that was really instrumental as well because our staff began to get the buy-in so continuing with the dialogue about our staff, our staff you know we did a lot of work anyway with our state standards.

She further noted:

Another thing that we did was we tried to when we prepared our proctors we tried to simplify things in the sense of we made NECAP checklists, what you do before testing, what you do during testing, and what you do after testing. So we tried to streamline that whole process for staff so they could focus on the actual preparedness of their students for the task.

Mrs. Shore noted some of the efforts to use time and people more strategically by commenting on the schedule and the organization of staff. She said:

So I think one of the biggest changes we made work to reduce the actual test taking window from three weeks down to three days essentially, and what we did was we took every available highly qualified teacher and made sure they were proctors. We took our kindergarten through second grades that weren't testing and we created an interdisciplinary unit where we had kindergarten teachers and assistants creating work around literature map, those kinds of activities away from the testing setting. So for three straight days the school we tested we took a block of 90 minutes, break, and then 90 minutes so we did two tests a day.

Ms. Sandollar added:

We also changed our whole schedule for that week and we usually tried to get all the testing done in three days and then we'd have that next week for makeups. We talk to that over and over and over at meetings and what was the best scenario and what could

we possibly do to make that the best scenario. We found that that's what worked for us so that's what we did. We did it in three days, they had two sessions first thing in the morning and then the rest of the day they got to, depending on your grade level, in seventh and eighth grade had like you know structured themes that they were doing, just some laid-back kind of activities.

Another aspect to promoting the success of all students relates to appropriate utilization of available accommodations for students with special needs. Multiple survey and interview participants spoke to the personalized nature of the decision making process when it came to determining accommodations. Mrs. Shore noted the deliberate process the staff used in preparing for accommodations:

Another thing that we did was we carefully, at the end of June when we had grade level meetings or work together, really identified kids that needed accommodations and we did that in June and not in the fall. So we spent a lot of time dialoguing about those students that needed accommodations, what accommodations would they need, and had all the paperwork prepared so that when we came back in the fall the only students that we were concerned about were any incoming students or new students that we would have to make sure that we had appropriate accommodations for.

### **Expanding to the Systems View: Good to Great Framework**

Up to this point, the improvement story of Lighthouse has been one of maximizing student performance on the NECAP test through motivation, a better test-taking environment, and focused test prep for students. While this seems to have helped lead to short term gains, the principal and staff at Lighthouse also began to examine systems that would have a greater impact on *how much students learn*, not just *how well they can take a test*. If the improvement story of

Lighthouse were to end here, there would certainly be much to recognize in the short-term gain of student scores. There would not however be a story to tell about continuous improvement over multiple years and a journey that may parallel what Collins (2001) described in *Good to Great*. To evidence this continuous improvement, data will be organized as it lines up with the various elements of the *good to great* framework.

### **Confronting the Brutal Facts**

As presented in the earlier description of the improvement journey, the designation of SINI/DINI had a sobering effect on the staff of Lighthouse, and was a major factor in the decision to focus on improvement in student performance on the NECAP assessment. One of the first steps was using the NECAP data to inform teaching and focused areas for improvement. As Mrs. Shore said:

You know in the beginning we did a lot of item analysis and, very important part of that beginning process, but then we began to really look at strands instead of looking at every item, to look at strands where we are weak. We knew for example that number and operations were at a weaker level than maybe say the state average, so during grade level meetings we would have a lot of dialogue about that. We would let staff know that you know “this is an area that in general we seem to be lower than where we want to be.” We can set those goals, those attainable and achievable goals, with the staff by looking more at the strands where we were falling down.

This principle of confronting the brutal facts filtered down into individual teacher reflection as well. As one survey respondent noted:

I found consistently my students were not performing well in money and multiple step problems. I used this data to adjust my teaching in that content and then I developed a



pre-assessment in math so I could identify student strength and weakness. This helped me in planning my lessons and instruction.

This ethos became part of a system of improvement where the “brutal facts” became the next new challenge in a “we can always do better” environment. As Mr. Beacon commented:

I still say a student who is well advanced in doing everything they need to do academically, socially, whatever, and enrichment is what they need so they need to be challenged. Because I hear it all the time, and again I have 420 kids in this building and I might hear it 10 times a day I mean 10 times a year, which is my “kid’s not being challenged.” That kills me, that absolutely kills me when I hear that. You know I also hear 10 complaints a year saying “my kid’s not getting enough support that they need.” That doesn’t kill me as much because I know I can lay out the cards to show you all the areas of support, but I cannot lay out the cards of everywhere your kid’s being challenged.

### **Culture of Discipline**

As stated in the introduction, the success of early efforts to improve NECAP scores coincided with a shift in the culture of the school to a more collaborative environment with heightened purpose and focus on student learning. This disciplined approach was evident through expanded collaborative structures and a greater sense of purpose to the work, particularly in reference to their Response to Intervention (RTI) model and the use of data to establish a comprehensive system to monitor student progress. Survey respondents were consistent in their reference to data use, with comments such as:

Our school has an amazing staff that values student learning. They look at the whole child and make decisions based on what is best for students. Recently, it has been our

goal to maintain the momentum needed to have our students succeed on the NECAP assessment knowing that many decisions were going to be made using that data. It's been hard, but our staff has really pulled together throughout this process.

Another respondent said, "We have created spreadsheets using many data points to monitor our students' overall progress. Those are updated three times a year as we continue to gather current data." Further, one respondent said:

The data collected is put into a spreadsheet that takes a lot of data points to determine where a student is most needy. We also use NWEA as a monitoring tool to see the growth or areas of need for students. We test at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year. Mid-year are students who are at risk they are tested for a check in. We also DIBEL students and give the DAZE at the beginning of the year.

As Mrs. Shore elaborated:

The other thing that we did that I think we did very well is we really embraced a strong RTI model. So a lot of our students in those subcategories, the socioeconomic and special ed, we had strongly beefed up our Tier 2 and our Tier 3 instruction. We are using scientifically-based materials, we have team scheduling, so we go in and we have grade level team scheduling with the reading specialist, Title I, special ed, occupational therapists, and speech therapists. We go in as a team. We talk about our highest hitters first. Those kids that require OT, speech, maybe an hour of instruction in reading outside of the classroom. So we schedule all of those students first, we schedule our Tier 3 and then we schedule our Tier 2, we talk about any Tier 2 instruction that is going to be happening in the classroom. Then we are constantly progress monitoring them. We use both DIBELS and aimsweb and we talk about the data we are collecting in regards to

those students and we use fluid movement based on where some of those kids are moving at a faster pace than other students. We really feel like we've looked at the subcategories too, that population we really started to work on them.

The many references to the use of data in determining student needs and monitoring progress paints a very clear picture of a school embracing data-driven decision making. As described in the application to the New Hampshire Excellence in Education (EDies) awards program, authored by a committee of staff and administration:

Our school has a very solid Response to Instruction or RTI model. We collect data from a number of sources and have created a spreadsheet for every grade level regarding the strengths and areas of improvement of those students. These help us determine Tier II and Tier III interventions for our students as well as enrichment opportunities. Students are serviced with scientifically-researched based materials. We benchmark our students three times a year and progress monitor students at risk regularly. We have data meetings which involve all vested parties after these benchmark periods to analyze current data and use that data to help drive our instruction.

Mrs. Shore described the growing and comprehensive use of data in monitoring student learning:

The data sources we used were data sources for all students so we were consistent. From that spreadsheet we rank order students from significantly above grade level to significantly below grade level. We have zones, we have different colored zones, so when we are identifying students for Title I, special ed, and specialists, we work bottom-up. So when I talk to you about the highest hitters, the longer a student stays in this district the more data points we have to begin to look at how this student is performing. We also get academic grades, those are built into the whole databank.

This systematic use of data was supported district-wide, with central office administrators modeling its use and facilitating discussions. As Ms. Sandollar put it in describing the work of the assistant superintendent:

She started developing the spreadsheet which was for Title I purposes to track and make sure we have our funding for that recorded. We started using those spreadsheets to bounce off of to look at those kids we really needed to target and then we would also use the NECAP spreadsheet. She did a lot of graphs for us, a lot of analysis of that data, and she still at the beginning of the year will pop those graphs up and show us the updated graph and she keeps adding to it every year.

The core value of teamwork is also clear as teachers are organized into grade level teams, as well as cross grade level teams to examine student data for the purpose of helping students succeed.

As one survey respondent said:

The school uses several tests such as the NWEA, DIBELS, and other standardized tests to monitor progress. This data is used to determine what type of academic interventions a student will receive. Academic (grades) and behavioral data are examined weekly by the school's Student Assistance Team. This team consists of administration, special education administrator, counselors, nurse, and social worker. We meet individually with students to address either of these concerns.

The “culture of discipline” at Lighthouse was also instrumental in building team capacity and a system that can effectively monitor student progress. The response to intervention (RTI) model that the school used was intended to focus resources on students who needed extra support. This RTI model grew to include multiple sources of data on student learning and

interventions designed to catch students up quickly if they fell behind in reading or math. As one survey respondent said:

We use data in our grade team to determine groupings for our Intervention blocks and who receives any additional services. We have now fall and spring NWEA, DAZE, DIBELS (for grades 4 and under and any at risk students), aimsweb, KeyMath Assessments when we need to dig deeper with students. Certain reading programs with probes and benchmarks to monitor progress in greater detail.

Student assessment data use was a key theme throughout survey responses as well as interviews. As another survey respondent said, “Data is used to drive our RTI instruction. It is also used by classroom teachers when they are forming flexible small group instruction.” Another noted, “Data is referred to constantly, and we have had a number of meetings discussing different databases and their results.”

The use of data in a disciplined collaborative environment led to increased precision in developing strategies to meet the needs of individual students. This personalization even seemed to allow staff to *look beyond the data* in an effort to reach kids. Mrs. Shore shared this anecdote:

He was coming up as a child of great risk but anyone who really knew him or talked to him...so we did a little reverse psychology and we decided that we would place him in the algebra class for mathematics. He will get a bump up and have some of his peers that you know are better role models. We also provided his intervention as an intervention with executive functioning. He works directly with the guidance counselor and another student in intervention and organizing his paperwork, making a schedule of what he needs to do each day so we really worked on his area of need. The spreadsheets are one way of looking at multiple data sources, but we also have meetings where we sit down

and talk about these kids, especially those kids who are not falling where you would suspect them to be falling.

So rather than narrowing the lens by which staff looked at student performance to singular test scores, this use of data and the personalization of learning seemed to shed light on a broader view of factors associated with individual student success. Mrs. Shore went on to note:

I think that's another great way of looking at the whole child. Another thing even in grade level meetings we talk about Tier I but we also say what's interfering with your ability to instruct at a Tier I level. We know those are those very difficult kids who maybe cognitively are fine but behaviorally are just so challenging so at that point we have a Student Assistance Team that meets every Monday morning. They look at those students and try to develop plans that will address their needs and monitor them closely, so there are ways that we look at lots of different things about children than just the NECAP.

In addition to using data in a disciplined manner to address student needs, these data discussions also informed curriculum and teacher practice in a similar way. Survey responses were consistent in their reference to these structures. For example as one said:

There are weekly grade level meetings with follow up meetings with the principal and assistant principal regarding curriculum and student learning. We gather data from a number of different sources in making educational decisions. We also use that data to determine students requiring Tier II and Tier III instruction.

Mrs. Shore elaborated on this noting:

So all of those things are more relative to the testing setting but what else we did was we decided how are we going to work throughout the school year to make sure that we are

sustaining and/or increasing the academic achievement of our students. So in each of our district schools the reading specialist and the math specialist met weekly with grade level teams. During those grade level meetings we talked a lot about what was happening during Tier 1 instruction so what's happening in regards to ELA and mathematics during your class time.

This team approach to decision making is a core strategy in improving classroom practice as well as identifying student needs. As described in the application to the New Hampshire Excellence in Education (EDies) awards program:

Our school holds weekly grade level meetings. The meetings consist of the math specialist, the reading specialist, and grade level teachers. The meetings discuss Tier I instruction in the areas of English Language Arts and mathematics. Our local curriculum, which is aligned to the Common Core State Standards, good instructional practices, and our students' work, lead these weekly discussions. These allow us to review curriculum regularly and improve instructional practices.

### **Hedgehog Concept**

The Hedgehog concept, as described by Collins (2001) is the intersection of a strong mission focus (what can we be best in the world at?), a strong sense of value (what are we deeply passionate about?), and a strong understanding of a path to prosperity (what drives our resource engine?). While return on capital investment is not the resource engine for schools, student achievement became the primary "profit" in the work at Lighthouse. The initial narrowing of purpose and focus on student achievement, particularly as measured by the NECAP test, helped focus the collaborative work of the staff. As stated in the EDies application, "The unequivocal goal in data analysis at Lighthouse is to improve student achievement." This focus on student

learning and the strategies to increase it began to feed the identity of Lighthouse. Multiple sources of data reinforced that the mission and values focused on the success of students and the personalization of education, with a growing pride in what made Lighthouse unique in its greatness. Survey respondents noted:

The mission and vision of our school is to create a successful, fulfilling educational experience for our students. Our official mission is "Where students come to learn, grow, and succeed." We examine data and put student needs first. We do this all the time.

Another responded, "The teachers and staff are very dedicated and work hard to ensure students are getting everything they need to be successful."

This successful and fulfilling educational experience seemed to be guided by the active engagement of students and the many ways teachers would differentiate instruction through their classroom, Tier 1, and supplemental Tier 2 and 3 interventions. Survey responses were consistent in their reference to these approaches and systems, such as:

I think our teachers constantly look for ways to better support our students. For me it is key to get to know my students, see where they are at, and find ways to challenge them. This kind of differentiated instruction is key. Constantly I encourage students, asking them to evaluate their own work and provide them with meaningful feedback so that they can see where they need to grow.

Mrs. Gull elaborated on the differentiation in the classroom by saying:

If we lived in a perfect world every kid would have their own kind of learning plan as you know. I think there are some places that are actually piloting this, but I think we try to do that as closely as we can and our little intervention groups are like that. We really try to target what do kids need and to give them what they need. One of the things I think



we do well, you know special ed has its own thing and so does Title I and they help kids, but there were always these kids who fell into cracks. This is where I think that we pick that up, we get to those kids and we're not afraid to say 'you know what you guys need to sit at that table and I need to talk to you guys about creating a sentence. These guys over here are okay with that.' In my head I'm thinking these guys don't need it but these guys do. I know that differentiation is the buzzword in all of that, but sometimes I think it's even more than that. You have to give them, you have to give it permission to be okay with that, and you have to give kids permission to be okay with that too. It does tend to drive what we're doing.

This value of personalized learning and corresponding strategy of differentiated instruction was consistently brought up to the system level through Lighthouse's Tiered instruction model. This was consistently identified in the survey, with responses such as:

With the help of our specialists, now in our schedule, currently all students receive an intervention block. During this time, we focus on meeting student needs in smaller groups. Students who are excelling have an opportunity to have extension activities that continue to motivate them.

As Mrs. Shore elaborated:

Yes, our Tier I instruction is accessibility to all. Our students have Tier I instruction in ELA and mathematics. There are a few that don't. Some of those really severe kids, from there some of those students receive an additional half hour service either inside the classroom or outside the classroom depending on the severity of their needs and our Tier 3 students get an additional 60 minutes of instruction outside of the classroom.

Mr. Beacon described the effect of this work over time and the continuing challenge by saying:

I really wanted to target the top-Tier students. Because as we progressed over the last three or four years what we've done is we've moved that lower red-orange zone kid to the mid-level, the mid-level kid to the upper. Now what is called our purple zone we have a pretty substantial amount of purple zone kids well above and what I've watched the last three years is that we're starting to lose them, they're starting to sag back down into well above average or average range instead of the superior range. You know we target instruction for that mid-level kid, we support that low-level kid to make them successful, but we don't do anything for this upper-end kid.

This focus on meeting the academic needs of the full range of students emerged as the primary mission and passion for the staff at Lighthouse. Mr. Beacon continued to explain by saying:

We talk, everyone talks the good game of differentiation and you do, you differentiate at the lower end all the time. You help those kids who you know just can't do it and you modify their assignment but how often do you really modify an assignment for a kid that is breezing through this day in and day out, whether it's first grade or seventh grade? My feeling, my walk-throughs, my discussions, and it's not just here but I think as a whole we don't focus on that. We have special programs for the kids who are really low, several grade levels behind, and Title I, and Tier 2 in the classroom, but what are we doing, and yes some of it is Tier 2. I mean we're doing more of the walk to read modeling K, 1, 2, which is great and I've been really pushing that. Because you might have a kindergartner, and we do we have three of them right now, that are reading on a high first grade level so why aren't they in first grade doing their reading when we're doing reading groups? You know you have three kids sitting at your table and doing

accelerated reading and that's what they're doing now. We're doing the same thing in math. We're doing more of that, especially between grade levels.

This continuing mission of the success of all kids seems to have opened up the doors of possibilities when it comes to programs, as well as addressing the physical, social and emotional needs of kids. Mr. Beacon put it this way:

We truly have individualized I think in a very good way. You know it's a building of 400 kids, that there's not many students that are falling through the cracks. If we can find the ones that are falling through the cracks we try to find them and offer them something different and it's not simply "okay put them in special ed" or "give them Title I." It might be "hey, you know what? We're gonna have them work with the library media specialist." We're not only looking at the kids who did make the threshold to proficient, we're also looking at kids that are proficient but should be proficient with distinction, saying you know this kid's performing, their test scores are fine, but something's not fine. Maybe socially they're not making friends or you know there are behavior problems even though their test scores are great. So we've even focused on that cohort of kids not just the ones, you know our redline kids are the ones who are just not making proficient, but almost every kid here has had their information, and not just school scores, looked at individually to see you know are they in the right program? Are they in the right place? Are we meeting all their needs?

This comprehensive approach to personalizing the school experience for students again was made possible by the collective work of teachers collaborating in a team environment to meet the needs of all kids. This team approach and progress monitoring enables the teaching staff to personalize student learning by looking at each student closely. As Mrs. Shore put it:

Even from there, from our spreadsheets, which have been really effective for us, we know there are some students that are those outliers. Those students who are really performing at a lower level than our instinct tells us. As an example, I worked with a boy last year, a seventh-grade boy, who came out in the zone that required services. Well just sitting with that boy for just a very short time I realized he was so smart, just really had some executive functioning issues, troubles with organization, follow through, motivation, all those things so you know what, when it came time to do any kind of testing, he blew it off.

One of the elements that guided the staff at Lighthouse through all of their work at personalizing learning and differentiating instruction was the clear articulation of expected learning outcomes. This work proved critical to the continued improvement of results because the work was about personalizing the *approach* and not personalizing the *outcome*. That is to say, ALL students were expected to achieve high standards and those standards were closely aligned with established state standards. As Mrs. Shore explained:

We would talk a lot in the very beginning stages about what standards you are addressing when you're doing your literacy circles or trying to get our staff to dig into those deeper and really embrace them, and know them like they know their Social Security number so they are really comfortable to have those kinds of conversations.

She went on to say:

That's where the grade level meetings initiated from where we could have a lot of dialogue about our Tier 1 instruction and what that was looking like. Our curriculum we worked really hard at. Even at that point we were moving to Common Core State standards back in 2011. That is when we really started to say this is where we are

headed. When we wrote our curriculum, based on at that time New Hampshire State standards, but also Common Core.

This alignment work fed into the system in place for assessment and intervention. Mrs. Shore elaborated by saying:

We really started to look at curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Those are three areas we really looked at closely and identified goals in each of those categories. From there were some of the beginning things we did like talking about using common assessments. Some of those common assessments we did from NECAP released items so we could monitor students how they were progressing towards meeting the demands of the NECAP. Three times a year we would assess our students based on released items and we did grade level team score so we would meet as a grade level and actually score those assessments and create spreadsheets to look at how our students were moving towards meeting our goals for the NECAP in the fall.

This system established routine schedules and times for students to get the targeted instruction they needed. Ms. Sandollar noted the strategic use of the intervention time this way:

Then we also have our intervention time, we do a split block. It's an hour long they do a half hour math and a half hour reading and that is also the time that if they have a service, a special ed service, they're pulled for their service at that time. At this stage they really don't want to be pulled out of classes, it's not cool anymore, so anything that is serviced at that time goes from that time. We also have our math specialist who does a higher-level math class. He pushes them onto seventh and eighth grade algebra.

This strategic use of time is an area that has been refined over the years to stand out as an area of expertise at Lighthouse. This included the expansion of the school day. Mrs. Shore noted:

We far exceed the state minimum so we've increased from all this work. We used to start school at 7:55 AM and we finished at 2:40 PM. Now we start our school day at 7:45 AM and we finish our day at 3:00 PM, so we've extended the length of our school day.

In speaking about the greatest levers for improvement, Mr. Beacon put it this way:

I think what I hang my hat on is the schedule. You know yes, teacher buy-in, teacher prep, teacher accountability, all are a part, but if there's one thing taking all of that in and equaling that out across the board, the one thing that you know, basically we have the same staff we had five years ago as we do now, but what is the one thing that really, I think looking and fine-tuning our schedule. It was making the scheduling changes that really optimized the time that we do have and structuring it in a way, you know, again what seventh and eighth grader would you rather have interventions or would you rather have recess? Every kid's gonna say they would rather have recess, but we've never had recess, but we've had study hall which was recess.

This honing of the schedule and priority on time for learning emerged as a point of pride for Mr. Beacon. He said:

I challenge anyone to find another school district that has a longer school day than us. I mean we start at 7:45 in the morning and we go to 3 o'clock every day. I mean my kids go to the district next door and they start at 8:30, you know 35 minutes after we do and they're out at 2:45, 15 minutes sooner. I mean that's 45 minutes a day times 180 days, I mean they have two recesses during the day for their K-5 kids we have one 30 minute

recess. They've got two 25-minute recesses, there's another, you know, their lunch is 35 minutes ours is 30 minutes. You look at all those minutes and then look at it in a week, look at it in a year, a lot of content that can be taught.

### **The Flywheel**

In Collins' (2001) good-to-great framework, the theory of improvement suggests that instead of one singular defining action, organizations build greatness through constant attention to processes of improvement and building momentum to a point of breakthrough. Many elements already described around focused on the use of data, structured use of time, and a mission-driven sense of personalized approaches to reach high standards. These contributed to a constant push to get better and better. Multiple data sources spoke to this belief and commitment to continuous improvement, and the structures put in place to support and enable it. Teachers were able to look back and identify early stages of momentum in growth. As Mrs. Shore said:

You know in the beginning we did a lot of item analysis and, very important part of that beginning process, but then we began to really look at strands instead of looking at every item. We looked at strands where we are weak. We knew for example that number and operations were at a weaker level than maybe say the state average so during grade level meetings we would have a lot of dialogue about that. We would let staff know that you know this is an area that in general we seem to be lower than where we want to be. We can set those goals, those attainable and achievable goals with their staff by looking more at the strands where we were falling down.

This grew into the strategic focus on tracking student progress. In referring to the support of the Assistant Superintendent, Ms. Sandollar noted:

So a lot of that prior work went into a lot of meetings, a lot of data completion, a lot of analyzing the data. Then from there she kind of almost changed the mind frame to “maybe we can do this.” Then it shifted, we put a lot of other things in place that we will go over here in a minute, I think that’s when that shift came. It’s in years two, three, and four we really started to ramp up what we were doing under her direction and leadership and her really saying the positive attitude that ‘yeah we can do this.’ Then we started implementing things and then from there we started seeing results. I think kind of, you know that first year we saw results boosted us to ‘let’s try even harder and make it even further.’

When asked how these early wins were influenced by or created a sense of ownership in the results, Ms. Sandollar went on to say:

I guess it kind of goes both ways in our situation here specifically because I think once we saw that our scores had gone up on that NECAP, we were like ‘she was right we could do this.’ now we can take it even further and continue it. I think that kind of helped the students, ‘well we did do this,’ the same morale and boosting them. So I think you could kind of go both ways in our specific situation where we took on the ownership of trying to improve, we did, and then that boosted us even more. So I think it could kind of go both ways in that scenario.

The ability to have a system that evidences student results cannot be underestimated in its effect on the sense of self-efficacy on the staff and students. Again, the progression is evident from early on in Lighthouse’s improvement journey. As Mrs. Shore said:

I’ve seen a significant change right from the pep rally and motivation to when our students have scored successfully you can feel it. When Mr. Beacon gets on the intercom



and says our students made it, our kids know what making AYP means. There is a huge celebration within the school. So the students have bought into it. They know the importance of it. All the way through they know these are the skills we are working on to move us forward to make AYP. Those kids know it from a very early age.

She went on to say:

Again it's kind of like that contagious environment if you're creating an environment where people are working hard and giving it their best effort it seemed to kind of fizzled out to the rest of the group. As we got going we thought about again staff being coaches and how we get ready for a big game.

Mrs. Gull added:

I think as we started to move forward and got better and better at the NECAP, and then I think when we became, when we got off the SINI list it was just like, it was like magic. It's almost like everybody was like 'I knew we were good, I knew we were great.'

This positive effect on the attitude of students and staff was further explained by her as:

So that's the attitude in the building and I think that's carried over from the NECAP; it's that feeling that you know what we believe in ourselves we think that we're really good. I think that we communicate that to our kids and that they know that we really feel this is a great school and that they're doing a great job and that they're doing some innovative things.

The effect on the school culture as a result of these shifts in attitude was clear in the descriptions of the collaborative work of teachers. Mrs. Gull explained:

Now it seems like the culture has changed that we want to keep that going. Instead of sitting back putting our feet up saying alright we're off the SINI, the SINI list is gone and

we can just do nothing. I feel in this building the sense that people want to keep the excellence going and a great example of that is applying for the EDies this year.

She went on to explain the change in teacher to teacher interactions in the school, and the effect on teacher morale and energy this way:

It's also that feeling that I can go to anybody in this building whether they teach my grade level or not they will help me. If I say "okay so you did STEM in second grade would you be willing to sit down with me after school and tell me some?" "Sure, no problem." That's what you get. Not "I'm tired I've got too much to do." We all are tired at the end of the day. We all have too much to do, but if you ask anybody in this building to help you to get going on an initiative, they are right there. That's part of it too, we feel like we're on the cutting edge of everything and I think that has a snowball effect so we want to keep going.

This affirmation that continuous improvement takes continuous hard work has helped power the "flywheel" at Lighthouse and has contributed to a remarkable eagerness to take on new challenges. Ms. Sandollar explained:

I think another thing with this district is we've taken things we know it's coming and we don't wait until the last minute to do it. For instance, Common Core, we've been looking at that for like four years, and then it had to be in place this year. So this year, it's all second nature for us because we were teaching it, we started slowly teaching it four years ago. We had many staff days on it. We had many, so we're not worried about the content necessarily of Smarter Balanced, maybe a little worried about the structure and what it is set up like in those performance tasks. We've done pilots, we've done examples for staff days of what that looks like, we've researched the website for Smarter

Balanced and Common Core stuff. I think there are some schools that have barely started Common Core this year and they're panicking, and for us you know this is pretty easy, we've transitioned to it slowly and way back when we heard it was coming down the path. I think we've kind of done the same thing with the NextGen science standards as well. We started looking at those last year and we're fully teaching them this year. So kind of almost like getting a heads up on things prior to so that we are prepared when it has to be in place.

Mr. Beacon elaborated on the management of initiatives this way:

There's so much more to talk about there because one of our biggest pushes that I'm pushing right now, people are sick and tired, we have a staff meeting tomorrow, one of the things I'm presenting to them is that we just concluded our STEM task force. We've got the report to the Governor, but I'm going over that report because they need to hear what's coming down the pike. One of the things we've done a very good job of the past five years is getting ahead of the curve.

The increased confidence in achieving positive results, and the eagerness to take on new challenges has positioned the staff at Lighthouse to look at the Smarter Balanced assessment that will replace NECAP, with a very different perspective than the early NECAP days. When asked about the perspective on the new assessment, Ms. Sandollar responded:

Yeah, I think it's definitely changed. Of course now I got the new Smarter Balanced and we've all got to learn this all over again but I think it's definitely shifted from when I was here my first and second year to now. It's definitely a priority to try to do well and that I think we kind of set that standard and now it's like we don't wanna drop below that. So I think it's kind of like our own competitiveness, but also that pride the kids had, that pride

that the teachers had. You know it was overall a good successful thing so there were great things that came out of it.

She further explained some necessary elements in embracing that challenge, saying:

I think they definitely need to keep that morale up, that school pride, that school spirit.

We need to keep those things in place that we know worked, and if it's working don't change it. Don't fool around with too much of that.

Perhaps the greatest evidence that the "flywheel" has taken effect at Lighthouse is in the fact that as the staff has pulled back from a singular focus on test results to a more comprehensive look at student learning, and a focus on the physical, social, and emotional needs of the "whole child," the focus on results did not reverse. Mr. Beacon explained the effect this way:

Probably by communicating some of these other things, you know because our focus for three years was solely on the test. I tell you there wasn't much as far as soft skills and the other pieces, social pieces, behavior pieces, it was really about, for three years, it was about the test, prepping for the tests, doing things that would get us ready for the test. I think the message is clear now that that's so important to us and we need to have students prepared in those content areas. However the work we've been doing, things we've been discussing at staff meetings, and things that I've been going around at grade level meetings discussing, those types of things which are now more of the soft skills the last two years. Actually I've been pleasantly surprised because one of my fears in doing that, deliberately doing that, was that all of a sudden we'd start relinquishing the importance of the test prep and stuff, but it's actually worked just the opposite.

Another key element to the accelerated growth in student learning at Lighthouse was the strategic use of professional development. In the early stages of their improvement journey professional development time was tightly controlled by district administration for the purpose of narrowing the focus as well as limiting teacher time out of the classroom. As Mr. Beacon said:

We've really focused on keeping teachers in-house instead of always out to professional development. We've loosened that a little bit where people are going away a little bit more but for three years we really hunkered down that basically no one's going anywhere for PD. We do our PD in-house, focused on things in our mission and vision and in our goals right now and that worked.

Mrs. Shore elaborated:

From looking at some of those strands I told you about, a lot of our internal staff has been providing professional development. I know that the reading specialists and I do a reading course and we do a writing course. Our math specialists in both buildings provide a math course for in-district employees. We have our two fifth grade teachers that we've adopted PlanbookEdu and they became the specialists and they provide the training for that. Our Tech Ed people provide internal professional development in that area. So we have a lot of internal professional development based on our district goals and initiatives.

These in-house professional development opportunities were not only tied to school and district goals and initiatives, they were also designed to build collective capacity to impact the results of the NECAP assessment. As Mrs. Shore explained:

I would say luckily even though we had some turnover of staff there is enough senior staff here that could share out that momentum. You know I think because luckily I've

been here for a number of years, the math specialists, we had two math specialists during the transition, but both strongly working together so a lot of our things or initiatives that we started we were very familiar with. We did a lot of the training, and our staff kind of knew the importance and they kept the stamina and they were able to persevere and all of that. It's all of the things you want to see. I keep equating it to kind of like a championship but that's kind of what we are looking for. Those scores that come out at the end, did all our hard work, did all our practicing, did all our scheduling and things we hold together to do work for us.

Survey responses referred to a system to incentivize teachers to take part in this in-district professional development outside of school hours. One survey respondent described:

We have a Track Program that was first implemented last school year as an incentive to collect staff development hours above and beyond the regular hours. A stipend is awarded for a certain number of hours completed. The district determines what workshops or training sessions determine track hours. The most recent areas of focus have been on Common Core and Universal Design for regular education and special education teachers, and implementation of a life skills curriculum for students with more specific needs.

Mrs. Shore elaborated on this system by saying:

Our district has something we call track hours. So in order for you to receive an additional \$500 bonus you have to achieve 75 track hours. 150 to get \$1000 but once you achieve it, it never goes away. That's the motivation for staff.

This system allowed the district to prioritize which professional development offerings would be eligible for track hours and the incentive pay. Ms. Sandollar elaborated on the district's strategy this way:

Then recently two years ago, the year before, because I went on maternity leave when it started, they had put into place track hours. So you had PD hours, you had PD track hours, and if you get to a certain amount of hours by a certain window of time you get an extra \$500 or up to \$1,000 in your check, which doesn't go away so that by the time you retire it's a decent amount for your younger teachers. Older teachers close to retirement, it's really not worth it, but that has to be all after school hours so if it's during school hours it's only PD. If it's after school hours and it's offered by our district, something they approve, then we get track hours.

While the limiting of professional development to in-district courses and workshops was intended to produce a more focused and efficient strategy, Mr. Beacon was somewhat concerned about the important aspects of professional development they may be missing. In explaining this tradeoff he said:

One of the things I would say that probably a downfall of the district is in a lot of ways we've kind of pulled inwards and don't do as many things outwards as far as the teaching and teachers are concerned. A lot of our professional development has been in-house through the track hours initiative, which again has been able to keep our teachers in the building, give them professional development, but more importantly having teacher-student contact time which we thought was very important. The downfall to that is that sometimes we do feel isolated. I feel sometimes that you know, administratively I've been able to branch out but as I look at the whole, as I look at our teachers, we have a lot

of people come in to visit to see what we're doing but we don't necessarily have a lot going out to see what others are doing. I think in time that needs to change.

The district's strategy to build in compensation incentives to impact student learning did not end with the track hour system. Survey respondents referred to incentive pay another way. They referred to an increase in pay if the school made adequate yearly progress (AYP) on the NECAP test. Unlike the track hour system, this incentive was not seen as a positive thing for student results or the overall culture of the school. One respondent noted, "A positive environment is responsible for the sustained growth. I am afraid that someone might look at the data and link it to incentive based pay which I do not think is responsible for the growth." Ms. Sandollar described what she saw as an inherent flaw in the system, that is that the attainment of AYP is based on performance broken down into small subgroups, and therefore not a measure of overall growth in student learning. That is to say, a school could make dramatic growth in student learning, but if one subgroup does not make AYP, the school is determined to not make AYP. She described the scenario at Lighthouse this way:

If our school made AYP we get the incentive. Now this year all the other schools got the incentive and this school did not because we did not make AYP but we still made more growth than the other schools. So that's where some of the issues kind of lay with the data kind of looking at it that way but that's a whole other issue.

### **First Who...Then What**

In Collins' framework, one of the key personnel strategies leaders employed was to hire people who would bring new ideas to the organization, and to involve them in further innovation and strategic planning. This was in contrast to companies that only looked for new hires that aligned with an already established strategic vision. Multiple data sources spoke to the hiring



practices at Lighthouse, with a balance of views when it came to looking for innovative ideas or alignment with established practices. It became clear that personality traits and disposition were of primary importance, while experience with specific programs was valued, but at a secondary level. One survey respondent said:

There are a number of criteria points we look for in potential candidates. First of all, we need candidates that have a love of learning and see themselves as lifelong learners. We want them to have a good understanding of the Common Core State Standards. We look for good early literacy understanding and a constructivist view of teaching mathematics. We want them to have good ‘people skills’ and are willing to work as part of a team.

Another stated:

It depends on the position, but I think personality is huge. The candidates are all asked the same questions, and their responses are important, but often it seems that the team chooses the candidate that they are able to connect with. Especially when searching for a teacher to teach middle school, you need a teacher with a vibrant personality who can create balance in a kid's life. The knowledge of a topic is important, but if you can't connect with the kids, you won't get the information through to them.

Another said, “We look for a teacher with energy, knowledge of content and a willingness to become part of the north country.”

Mrs. Gull elaborated on some of the personal characteristics they look for. She noted:

So we’re looking for positive energy from people when we're hiring, that’s one of the things that we look at. I guess that’s what, we’re just looking for people who are passionate about what they do and some people can’t communicate that in an interview

and that's sad. They may be, but most of them we can see it and we can feel it from them. You want someone who's going to be invested in the community.

Mrs. Shore noted familiarity with existing programs at Lighthouse is seen as a plus. She also noted that teams are usually consulted in these decisions, saying:

I think we are looking for a lot of different things in terms of prospective new teaching staff. I think we're looking for when we are interviewing familiarity of some of the programs that we're using, some of our management in terms of PBIS, responsive classroom. I think we are looking for people who have a very strong background in ELA and math instruction. Generally Mr. Beacon will say "Mrs. Shore I want you part of the interview team, I want your questions really addressing early literacy, especially when we're hiring primary teachers." So I think there has generally been a team that works together as part of the selection process.

Mr. Beacon stressed the intangibles of first impressions and dispositions by relating the hiring of employees to the characteristics they are trying to develop in students in the district through the *Image of a Graduate* work. He said:

I look for, and again I joke with- usually the BLT is our hiring committee- and I joke with them saying in about seven minutes I can tell you whether this is a person who will fit in or not and would be a productive teacher here, because it's that eagerness. I do want to make it sound like you got to be a team player and everything because there's a lot of times you're by yourself in your classroom and you have to be self-motivated, but there's a piece that you know we talk about the *image of a grad*, the zest for life, the you know, thirst of knowledge.

He further explained:

Those are the pieces that I'm looking for so when you look at our *image of a grad* and we have those seven dispositions. Those are what I'm looking for when I look because you know what, people, you start with a certified applicant pool anyway so considering they're all certified to teach whatever we're talking about, they all have that educational component that content piece, so that's not what separates candidate one through candidate ten.

Mr. Beacon also spoke to the value of getting people in who would bring new ideas and add to the organizational capacity of the system. This perspective closely mirrored the "first who...then what" philosophy of hiring. As he put it:

So you know if you have those right dispositions you can go a long ways and that to me is the most important during an interview. You can tell within the first five minutes that person has it or doesn't in 90% of the cases. Do we miss some? Maybe, but overall as I look over the last three years of the people we've hired they have it, and again I think that's why we're not plateauing. These people are coming in saying "hey you guys have done some good things the last two years have you thought of this? Can I help?" Again I stress to the staff all the time, hey there's this great idea, and then they push it to me and say "hey you go do this." "What do you bring into the table? You bringing something to the table? Let me try to get a group of us to do this." That's what I want to hear. I want to see doers I don't want to hear people with great ideas (hand wash motion) wash their hands and then criticize. That's not what we want to see.

This priority in finding teacher candidates who bring innovative ideas and a new perspective is coupled with a system of support to help new staff become acclimated to

Lighthouse. Survey respondents referred to a mentor program that was put in place for new teachers. Mrs. Shore elaborated by saying:

The mentors have to go through a mentor training process and after they've been through the training process and we have identified the incoming staff we try to pair up. For example, we've got a new eighth grade social studies teacher and we try to pair them with somebody outside their unit. He's paired with a very strong sixth grade social studies teacher, so we try to look at whether it's a content similarity or strengths and then again we had a first grade teacher that we paired up with a third grade teacher that was a first grade teacher for a long time. Mr. Beacon is very much a part of that selection process. He really looks at his staff. I'm the lead mentor in the building so I keep track of all the paperwork that's required, making sure that if there's a conflict between a mentor and a mentee that I might intervene, but Mr. Beacon does really. I'm new to this position this year so I'm thinking that as next year comes Mr. Beacon and I will sit down together, but he's really been instrumental in making that decision.

Ms. Sandollar added:

Then we also on the other end when they do get hired you know the mentor program that we use when they get hired to make sure their induction is done and they're ready to go and have somebody to go to when they start here new.

### **Leveraging Technology**

Collins (2001) points out that one theme in good-to-great companies is that they selectively and strategically leverage technologies to accelerate their growth. While a concept like efficient systems of purchasing may not be easily transferable to a school setting, multiple

data sources did speak to the role of technology in improving student learning. As one survey respondent said:

Technology is used to transform instruction throughout the school. Teachers are using Google Docs for writing assignments, which allows teachers to add revision and editing notes right on the document. The entire school utilizes Learning.com. This is a computer-based program that supports our district's digital learning initiatives with content, tools, and services. Additionally, this year we piloted a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policy that enables students to utilize their own devices in school. Finally, our district Technology Committee is looking into establishing a one-to-one technology device initiative for grades six through twelve. We believe innovation is one spoke in the wheel of our school helping to propel our students forward in learning opportunities that will help them grow into the "*Image of a Graduate*" that we expect.

This reference to a one-to one technology environment, meaning every student would have access to a device every day, was elaborated on in teacher and principal interviews. As Mrs. Gull put it:

We want to be that school that's doing, same with now they're talking about a one-to-one initiative next year. Every sixth, seventh, and eighth grader next year will have their own device. I don't know what it's going to look like but again we're moving forward and what's that gonna look like and how's that gonna happen? The BYOD policy, bring your own device, we spearheaded that, we started that.

She also gave insight into how technology use is expanded at Lighthouse through teacher to teacher training and coaching. She said:

So this is a prime example. These are chrome books and the district wanted to try them so they bought a cart and they put it between my room and Sarah's room. She's young, she's about 26 or 27 and I'm the old lady and she carries me, believe me. So the tech guy gave it to us two and said "you guys will pilot this" because he knows I try to keep up with technology. If I don't I'm going to lose my, I'm gonna lose my kids, if I want to stay with them. So we piloted the chrome books. We do a lot with Google Docs and so she'll come in and say "hey guess what I just discovered now, you can do this." She and I have presented in front of the faculty meeting and said "hey you guys it's easy here's what you do."

Technology use at Lighthouse is clearly designed as a means to an end. That is to say, it is seen as a tool to better engage students who have grown up as "digital natives." Mr. Beacon put it this way:

Teaching pure technology just for the sake of teaching technology is something we haven't embraced. What we have done though is used it as a tool to enhance lessons and to enhance instruction, to excite and to engage students into you know a lesson. Now we're doing it in an exciting kind of hands-on way that engages students a little bit more so I think you know I use technology myself as an enhancer, not as the primary driver of knowledge.

He expanded on that by saying:

You know I think every kid here can use an iPad not because we directly taught everything but because we use them. You know every kid is proficient with using a computer not because we sit there and say this is how you use a computer. You know we'll have to do that for a kid here and there, but I mean generally speaking it is just for

an enhancement. Again, I think as we're diving into STEM as an area we're being able to draw on more and more technology and what we're finding is that the kids know it. It's training our staff on it so they're comfortable using that piece of technology instead of going back to the paper pencil in the classroom demonstration that every kid could be sitting there with an iPad in front of them you know doing the demonstration and doing it using the technology.

### **Part III: Values in Student Learning**

Multiple data sources contributed to an expanding conversation about what is valued most in student learning. Throughout Lighthouse's improvement journey, this conversation evolved as a consistent tension between what was measured and what was valued. This thread is explored to examine the question, *How do the indicators of success that are most valued by teachers and administrators in these schools compare with the indicators that define their identified status as great (i.e., a Reward School)?*

#### **NECAP in Context**

As noted in Part II, Lighthouse's improvement journey began with a strong push to improve student performance on the NECAP test. As that goal became the primary mission, conversation inevitably grew around the placement of NECAP results within the context of what is valued in student learning. As one survey respondent noted:

We put a high value on NECAP in the school district because we needed to change our status of SINI school and then at one point a DINI school district. We developed units to jump start the year, one year, to gear up for NECAP and aligned the beginning of the year to all NECAP prep and review of the previous year material. After NECAP was over we

would still continue to practice NECAP example problems that they would see in the next year's grade level as they were appropriate throughout the year.

Another responded, "The values of external assessments are aligned with what our school values most in student learning. Our school values educating the whole student and recognizes that external assessments are one, very important, measure of student progress." Mrs. Shore talked about the growing conversation about the alignment of NECAP items with valuable learning saying:

So in the beginning we just took out practice items and just kind of skill and drill practice items from the NECAP. Then we started to think about, well you know what if we believe that some of the activities that are being asked on the NECAP are of good merit how can we integrate that and with a theme so we come back in September instead of isolated drilling and killing this, why can't we create a unit to prepare our students for this test using test items that look very much like what you would see on the NECAP that are integrated into a theme?

This notion that the NECAP test assessed content and skills of value brought purpose to the work of integrating NECAP themes or released items into classroom instruction. It also helped frame the conversation to distinguish the value of the content and skills from the emphasis placed on the singular NECAP test. A theme emerged from the teacher surveys around not placing too much emphasis on one measure. As one survey respondent said:

The NECAP and assessments like it are just one snap shot of a student's learning. The skills needed to do well on the test are the reading, writing, math, and science skills that we want our students to be proficient in to ensure they can be productive citizens and contribute to society.



Another noted, “The idea isn't to inundate students with testing, it is more about having the "right" piece of data to get the best picture of how students perform.” Still another said:

I think our school has always valued student learning. We know that the NECAP is only one measure of a child's academic progress. We like to consider a variety of formative and summative assessments to help us determine the direction of our goals for our school.

The high-stakes nature of the NECAP and resulting SINI designation certainly added tension to the conversation about the emphasis on the importance of testing within the context of what was valued in student learning. In looking back, Superintendent Tide recalled:

But it’s funny because when I came we jumped immediately on the test and I thought that we had to. The community was losing confidence in the schools and budgets were squeaking by or not passing. The next year at our opening meeting one of the teachers got up and said you know there’s more to education than this, and I said you’re right and we intend to address more but right now we really need to stick to the business at hand.

Mr. Beacon added perspective on the district leadership discussions this way:

Some of us on the district leadership team that you know would say “yeah this is great we're working hard in this area but this is not the whole picture.” Sometimes when you’re that focused all you think is “hey if we move our proficiency rate from 65% to 75% we’ve done it!” We were still hammering out social issues, kids coming in not prepared at the preschool level, at the first grade level, at the middle school level to the high school level. We were still seeing kids falling asleep in class, you know what are they missing? What are their needs?

Finding the appropriate level of focus on the NECAP test was also a theme with teachers.

As Ms. Sandollar described:

For me personally I don't like standardized tests. It's just one measure a student can be judged by. I want to look at the whole child. For the district, I think because we had to we put it on a pretty high priority. But once it was over, okay now we can get into our important curriculum and teach what we need to teach and move on, but we did make a pretty high priority and that got into some heated debates with people. You know, "Why are we just teaching to the test? This is just one measure of a student's performance. You could catch them on a bad day and not get the correct measure." So we had a lot of those discussions and those debates but that's what was mandated by us and we just kind of ran with it and did what we needed to do to be successful. For me personally, no I don't want to put everything on a standardized test.

Interestingly, Ms. Sandollar herself exemplified the competing interests of placing the NECAP in a broader context yet putting a spotlight on improving results. In thinking about the transition to a new assessment, Smarter Balanced, she noted:

Yeah, I think it's definitely changed, of course now I got the new Smarter Balanced and we've all got to learn this all over again but I think it's definitely shifted from when I was here my first and second year to now. It's definitely a priority to try to do well, in that I think we kind of set that standard and now it's like we don't want to drop below that. So I think it's kind of like our own competitiveness. Also that pride the kids had, that pride that the teachers had, you know it was overall a good successful thing so there were great things that came out of it. I just don't like putting all my weight on one test you take once a year. I don't think it's a true measure of that whole child it's just one measure.

Mrs. Gull expanded on the discussion about the importance of the NECAP test and the use of the results for school accountability driving the emphasis on the test. She wondered, "But

who says it has to be one test? Why can't you demonstrate growth with a year-long portfolio? Why can't you have Johnny's writing piece in September and Johnny's writing piece in June and say look at the difference?" She continued:

How can we help these schools without making it based on the test? I thought about it a lot and I've talked to a lot of people. We talk about portfolios, we used to do them here. I think there are other ways. I think you still need to demonstrate growth and that's never going to go away.

### **Image of a Graduate**

As the staff at Lighthouse began to put the NECAP results in context, and as they saw dramatic improvements in those results, the ensuing conversation seemed to combine an element of "what else is important" with an element of "what is our next challenge." Survey responses spoke to the element of other important elements. As one said:

I do not believe that the mission and vision for this school is tied directly to exam results. Instead, it is tied to creating active community members. Our mission statement is "The mission of Lighthouse School District is to form a partnership with parents and the community to prepare all students to become lifelong learners in a safe environment with high expectations so that they will become responsible, productive citizens in an ever-changing society." While success on the state tests have been seen as important in the past few years, and I think we all want to have proficient students, our focus remains on making sure students enjoy learning. Education is discussion-based, and students are expected to take an active role in their school. I would like to see the community piece be developed a little better. I don't feel that our community has enough active involvement in our district.

Mr. Beacon expanded on this value of productive and engaged citizens with some concrete examples. As he said in referring to the school's work developing a system called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS):

I don't know if I shared this with you but my own scientific experiment, and this is how scientific it is, I stand at the door as they exit the building and say "good night have a nice day" and kids looking at me six years ago having no idea what to say. Now what happens they say "you too Mr. Beacon, see you tomorrow," "hey, that was a great scientific experiment Mr. Beacon," "hey, did I tell you what I did?" Again, those are the things that the community sees you know so when they see a kid at the grocery store and the kid opens the door for them to say "thank you" the kid looks them in the eye and says "you're welcome." You know those are the things that instead of the door slamming and saying "hey kid why don't you hold the door I have a bag of groceries," those are the things society-wise that are so sad, a lot of that is lost and has been lost in the last couple of decades. You know politeness, looking someone in the eye, you know and whether it's me or the Assistant Principal, or one of our teachers we're talking to the kids and we're looking them in the eye and when they're talking back to us we expect the same thing. It's kind of that global expectations that are unspoken. You know we don't have assemblies saying "when I talk to you you're going to look at me in the eye," but it's kind of respect to students and students that give respect, and if we don't see that we talk about that but that's happening. You know are we a PBIS school? Yes, we're a PBIS school. Do we follow it to a "T"? No, we do not follow it to a "T" but the kind of the spirit of PBIS are those things. You know and reinforcing them in a positive way and that's kind of the spirit we have even though we don't follow PBIS to a "T."

Mr. Beacon went on to describe the school in a transition of balancing this focus on other academics as well as soft skills. He noted:

So was it deliberate? Yes, it was but it was “okay our top priority, test scores are awful, these kids need to be educated better,” and then it kind of slowly started, and there was a time when they kind of intersected the social part as well as the academic piece. I would say still to this day, we're still focused, our focus is on next-generation and introducing STEM, still some of the reading and math interventions. But I think globally if you were to step into the building I think what you would see is more of an emphasis on some of those other soft skills, just as much as you see on some of the academic. So I don't know if you would call us in the transition phase, and I don't want to lose the piece that all of a sudden we're washing our hands of curriculum. No because we still have track hours, we still have PD, we're still observing that for classroom teachers, and observations. Our test scores are still very important to us, but there is a shift right now that's going on.

This shift coincided with work at both the district and school level to define essential elements in students as they go through the school system. This work defined what became known as the *Image of a Graduate*. Mr. Beacon described the early conversations at the district level through the District Leadership Team (BLT), made up of district administrators and building administrators:

So this started really kicking off about three years ago and it was something we were kicking around at the district leadership level and then said “hey, let's get some feedback on this.” So we formed some cohorts in each building of teachers and kind of flushed a lot of this out and we went back to the district leadership team then we kind of did the same thing for students and kind of showed examples and provided some skits and things

like that where you know “what you think of this, what you think of that, what do you think is important here?”

Teachers embraced this work as “resetting of the balance” in relation to what is valued in student learning and the pressure of high stakes testing. As Mrs. Shore put it:

More recently our superintendent discussed more than just the cognitive and academic view of the student and looking more at the habits that create a lifelong learner and a successful adult, you know some of those examples of perseverance, responsibility, all of those skills that make a person a whole person. I think for many years at the beginning of my career we talked a lot about the whole child and really educating the whole child and once high-stakes testing became much more a part of our education career I feel like we’ve veered away a little bit from it and we really narrowed in on that cognitive mindset because we were really looking at using one data source to determine whether or not we were making adequate progress. So I’m liking this because I’m thinking it’s really shifting back to really thinking about what a successful graduate would look like and it’s more than just scoring proficient with distinction on one test. I’m happy that we’re moving more in that direction. A lot of the classrooms are using that *Image of a Graduate* when they’re talking about different aspects of their school day. So that’s nice. Ms. Sandollar also explained some of the process in creating the *Image of a Graduate*,

saying:

Yep, that’s fairly recent the *Image of a Graduate* kind of rolled out last year and then finalized more this year when they started on the opening day for staff. Originally, they had our mission statement which was pretty long and that was created by the district level, and then we got word that it was changing a little bit and that along with that

change was where we had the *Image of a Graduate*. I think that was a lot of the Superintendent's work and his ideas and I think that was done at more of a district level. We've had some staff meetings where we've done some work with them, and I think that's where some of our input came in and they kind of tweaked things, a little bit according to what came out of different buildings in the district. I think it was kind of to have a cohesive look at what we're expecting for our students by the time they leave our district, kind of that perfect vision of what a student should be.

Mr. Beacon elaborated further, saying:

So yeah it was kind of that type of process and then we came up with it was kind of like a four block, you know what do these essential habits look like? Things that students must possess you know responsibility, reliability, punctuality, you know things like that and then we had the dispositions, which are your zest and your grit you know, being communicative, I think there are seven of them.

The *Image of a Graduate* work has quickly become embedded in the fabric of what is valued most in student learning at Lighthouse. In their EDies application they note:

Building and district level leadership initiated the "*Image of a Graduate*" to cultivate student success at the elementary, middle, high school and post-secondary levels. The "*Image of a Graduate*" is made up of four major areas and specific components within those areas.

The *Image of a Graduate* work was further summarized in a chart included with the EDies application, describing the detailed elements of knowledge, habits, abilities and dispositions of future graduates of the school district.

Figure 4.3 EDies Application Chart

Knowledge, Skills and Understandings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● content area focus and standards in the arts, career and technical education, English language arts, health and wellness, mathematics, social studies, science, technology, world languages</li> </ul>
Essential Habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● punctuality, preparation, reliability, responsibility, communication</li> </ul>
Necessary Abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● independent learner, problem solver, higher order thinker, collaborator, communicator</li> </ul>
Dispositions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● grit, self-regulation, zest, social intelligence, gratitude, optimism, curiosity</li> </ul>

Since there were multiple references to the Superintendent's role in this work, he was interviewed for his perspective on the significance of the *Image of a Graduate*. He described the intent this way:

So we made a pitch out of essential habits. Then the final piece or the last piece now is what we call dispositions, and that's a lot of the work that Paul Tough has talked about in his book *How Children Succeed*, Carol Dweck and Angela Duckworth and the whole notion of positive or growth mindset and the importance of things like grit. We went through lists and you know some lists are this long and what I wanted to stay away from was a list that incorporated what people might think of as values. We don't want to be accused of teaching your kids our values. So we picked out seven that we thought, even though they are values, it's grit, gratitude, social intelligence, self-regulation, curiosity, optimism, and zest. They're not values in the sense of honesty and all those and we have not had any repercussions from them. They are fairly elusive. They're hard to get a grip on but we begin with an idea that you have to have a positive or growth mindset. You have to believe you can change.



He went on to shed light on his sense of what the district-level role in this work is and what is important to leave to the building level. He said:

The interesting part is we talked about them and defined them and then I said “okay in your buildings I want you to foster them. I don’t know how you do it, and it is, it’s different by building.” The direction is the same. It’s the stressing of the importance of the dispositions and the habits as well as the abilities in content. It’s just talking with kids in getting them to realize how important something like grit is or curiosity, optimism. You know and we talked there’s some of them you look at the research actually talks about things you can do. For example to develop optimism, you help kids to develop a different story about what’s making them not optimistic and have them look at a situation in a different way. Social intelligence, some buildings do like light interviews with kids around different situations. “What would you have done differently?,” and erase that start from here. Grit, you know there’s a grit scale, it’s available on Google. It’s a 10 or 12 item scale and one of the interesting things was it was developed by Angela Duckworth. West Point has what they call the beast barracks and they give their cadets all kinds of tests, physical and mental, and so on to try to predict or have tried to predict who would survive the beast barracks. They allowed Angela Duckworth to administer the grit scale to the same group and the grit scale was a better predictor. I administer it here, which was interesting.

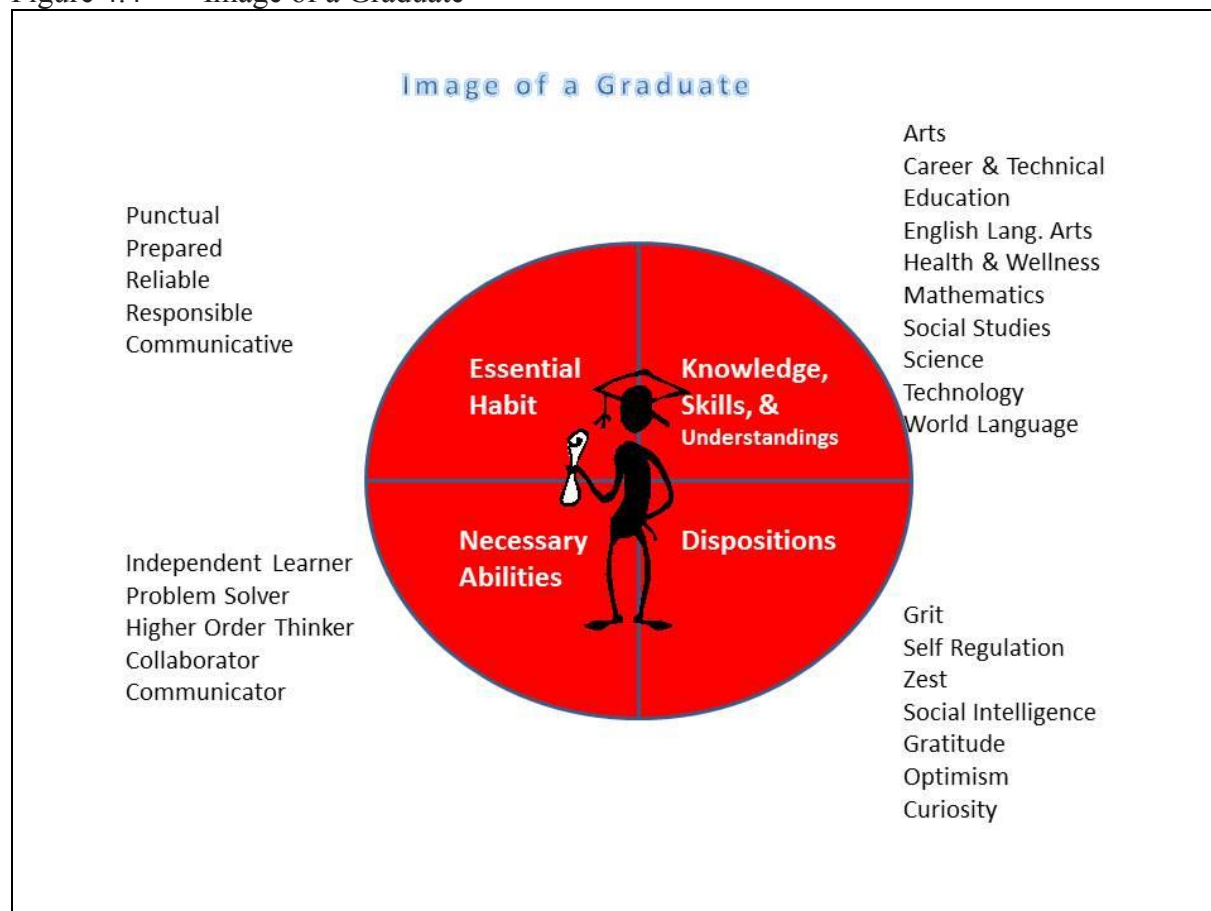
Superintendent Tide went on to appreciate the way the work has been embraced, saying:

So I think as I’ve said everybody was here when I came, had been here. There’s a commitment to the district, there’s a willingness. I’ve been places and probably so have

you where you go in and start to talk about the “*image of a graduate*” and people’s eyes glaze over, but no these folks really embraced it.

Lighthouse staff embraced and quickly found ways to incorporate the *Image of a Graduate* in their work. They started with a graphic (Figure 4.4) to represent the detail of each component. This graphic was duplicated and posted in various parts of the school to be a visual representation of the Image of Graduate framework so that teachers could refer to it with students and incorporate it into their lessons. Importantly, the framework captures all content areas under knowledge, skills and dispositions. In this way it reinforces the importance of content areas beyond those that are tested and reinforces the importance of connecting them with essential habits, abilities and dispositions.

Figure 4.4 Image of a Graduate



This visual helped staff connect various elements of student work with the vision of the *Image of a Graduate*. As Mr. Beacon described:

One of the big pieces at the district level is what we call the *image of a grad* and we really work that in here and the Superintendent lets us kind of work that into our buildings how we feel best kind of suits that. One of the things we came up with was our Lighthouse school news that we broadcast once a week, kind of capture those things like at our graduation last year our eighth grade graduation we had all of our students participate, “what does it mean to be a Lighthouse graduate?” you know *image of a grad* and they said it in their own words to their parents on the PowerPoint that we put up.

He went on to talk more specifically about the Lighthouse news example, saying:

The Assistant Principal and I really kind of when we looked at forming the Lighthouse school news, what qualities are we hitting here, what would that bring out, what do we want to get out of that? You know when there were some things that were just hard to kind of wrap our heads around, like zest. You know how do you, how can we demonstrate students being zestful here? You know and that’s really where the news came out of. Wouldn’t that be neat if they were showing it in their classrooms and we would be highlighting different things across the school, different projects, and that’s where that kind of developed.

The *Image of a Graduate* work not only resonated on a school wide level, it resonated with the existing dispositions of teachers and helped them frame their work with students. Mrs. Gull explained:

I think we do have it right and I think the *Image of a Graduate* is what the whole child was all about. Too often I think too many schools it’s all the focus is on academics and

they forget about the responsibility piece, the zeal and zest for learning. It's not just the academics, it's also what kind of a citizen are you? How are you treating other people? That's responsive classroom too. It all ties right into that. You are a member of this community, whether it's your home room, whether it's your language arts class.

She went on to describe the content and her approach with students, saying:

The first thing I ask my kids on day one is "raise your hand if you'd don't like to read and write and be honest." All of the hands go up and I say "That's my job. My job is to change your mind, and I will spend this whole entire year trying to do that," but that's okay you know because that's what it's all about. It's about loving reading and writing and having those conversations and talking to each other and talking to me in their journal about what they're reading and connecting and making connections and being a literary critic. Analyzing, synthesizing, and all of those higher order thinking skills, you know a book report doesn't do it.

Ms. Sandollar also described the integration of this vision framework into classrooms, pointing out:

In our classrooms, along with the *Image of a Graduate* we also have our dispositions. We have those different areas that we work on so it's like grit and zest and responsibility and time management. Those kind of things you know those skills that are not necessarily taught. Just to highlight those a little bit in the classroom, relate to them and make sure kids know what they mean, this is what we're looking for so what does it look like, what does it sound like, what are you going to see if I see somebody working with grit and zest?

The work of integrating the *Image of a Graduate* framework within the context of a school that has been more narrowly results-focused on NECAP has brought to the forefront a more balanced view of what is valued in student learning as well as an appreciation for how measured results are also impacted by this wider focus. Surveys spoke to this balanced view, with one respondent saying:

We try to tie them in with our *Image of a Graduate*, but it's important to realize that not all areas of perseverance and confidence are testable, which is why the Unified Arts are key to supporting students' thirst for life and creativity.

Mr. Beacon expanded on that by pointing out:

And we kind of foster that, you know in different projects across the building and we have them identify you know “hey that’s zest or that’s grit or that’s you know.” You really use the language that we’re trying to kind of push because we really do feel that, yeah there’s the academic piece that we’ve been focused on you know from 2009 until, I mean we’re still focused on it, but that was the driving force because we were so low. Our scores were very low, students weren’t achieving, so that was our big push for three, four consecutive years and then you know that’s kind of gotten under control. We also realized there’s other pieces that are just as important as the content knowledge and that some of the social skills, the kind of drive that pushes, you know it’s one of those things that when you see it in someone you know they’re a little bit different. They have what it takes, you know, and when they don’t have it you also see that very smart, book savvy, but you know they don’t have the drive, they don’t have either the responsibility or the zest, or the grit or the, you know when something goes wrong that’s it they’re done. So it’s, and we strongly feel that some of these things that we can actually foster a little bit.

They're not all you're born with it or you're not born with it. Some of it you can kind of foster a little bit, so that's part of our push.

He went on to talk about the balance this way:

So yeah there was always a push and you would always get a small line of resistance even when we are pushing so hard for the test, the test prep from teachers saying, "ahh this is just garbage, the important stuff is the cultural piece, you know morning meeting, responsive classroom, those are the things." There is a balance and I'd say right now you know three years ago our focus was 90% test, 10% social skills. I think now it's probably like 70-30, 60-40, I wouldn't say it's 50-50 I think our emphasis still is on the academics but there's more and you see it more throughout. You know, teachers kind of having that, you know, "hey before I get going in this unit we need to have a class meeting because our behavior's not where it needs to be, there's drama going on. We're gonna take care of this issue before we move on to that."

As the Lighthouse leadership and staff more clearly defined the school as a school that embraced the whole child and valued the many critical attributes of a productive and engaged community member, they correspondingly took a more comprehensive look at improvement in areas not tested by NECAP. As noted in their EDies application, "Qualitative and quantitative data are used at the Lighthouse School to promote teaching and learning across academic, personal/social and behavioral domains." For student behavior, Lighthouse began to track discipline referrals as one data point on student culture. As pointed out in the EDies application, "Lighthouse utilizes Student Wide Information System (SWIS) to track behavioral trends to help focus school climate and culture initiatives. In reviewing Lighthouse's behavioral data over the

past five years, school referrals have decreased every single year.” Mr. Beacon expanded on the effect on culture and climate by explaining the results of a recent school climate survey saying:

They were identifying not the content qualities but kind of those other soft skills that they really felt were important for us to work on. Actually we’ve seen some benefit, we just did a school climate survey and got the results which were very positive from our students you know “how do my teachers feel about me? How do I think my administrators feel about me?” You know that kind of stuff. You can see that movement along and that kind of direction.

Mr. Beacon went on to explain that in addition to the positive effect on behavioral outcomes, this focus has also affected student engagement. He said:

I actually feel that they’re still doing a fantastic job of preparing for a test or some type of assessment, though we don’t know what the test looks like yet. The social, soft skills, disposition piece has actually increased their, you know, their engagement into lessons and into getting work done because I think now that’s a part of the whole student. I think as students kind of buy into it more, classroom management’s easier. You know having them buy into “hey we want to get together for a movie night,” you know Friday night you have 95% of them showing up. You have an open house and you get 90% of the parents walking through the doors, so all of a sudden you start feeling like a whole professional. That it’s not just the test, the test, the test.

In a more anecdotal and qualitative reflection on the work over the last few years, Mr. Beacon again referred to the impact of focusing on the softer skills saying:

Because you know in 2012 if I were to say, you know, our test scores were back up there and pretty high up there, but I’m still scratching my head saying we’re still you know,

and it's one of those old tests, I'd stand at the door and I did this as assistant principal and said "good night" to every kid and I was just amazed on kids looking at me like they didn't know how to respond. Like no one ever said "good night" or "have a good weekend" and didn't know the response to give other than a crazy look. That piece always bothered me like socially you could be brilliant but then walk into a job interview and if you don't have the social skills to make eye contact or to shake a hand, you know people are gonna say "well you know it's between this guy seems a lot smarter but this one I think I could see him fitting in better" and people lose jobs even though they're more intelligent than the next person. So that's where kind of some of that work, and again I think we saw that across the district as well. So now when you stand there at the end of the day "hey Mr. Beacon" high-fives or fist pumps and this and that so that piece has come as far as the academics. I think that is just as important and I think it really helped us with the development of the *image of a grad* because I would take someone of average intelligence but has the zest and the grit to when they hit a problem, or when they have trouble in their life, they know how to get through that than someone that's up here and you know their world comes crashing down. We've seen cases of that left and right all the time and again it's not a failsafe but it's something we feel that we can kind of influence.

Perhaps the best example of how Lighthouse has evolved in establishing and communicating values in student learning is Mr. Beacon's description of the establishment of a life skills program at the school, which is a program that would bring students with severe special needs from other district schools to Lighthouse for a more inclusive education. As he described:



I think it's, I truly think if schools that focus their energy and attention on making every student increase growth, the thing that we even struggle with. You know we took, this was a big push of mine last year, we had pockets of life skill students throughout the district and I said "give those students to me here at Lighthouse and we will build the program that will engage the life skill students." Because we had four of them here, we had three at another school and a couple at another school and you know what I even saw here was because they're such a small number of the life skills it was very remedial. It didn't seem we were reaching and engaging the students and pushing them like we push every other student here. You know and I talked with our director of special ed, she retired last year, and I talked to our Superintendent and said "let's build a complete program that really we can engage the students in a life skills curriculum. We can give them the support they need and they would have access to the classroom. I can help our staff here kind of design their program you know if we know the student's coming in from 10 to 11 to be part of the classroom environment then we could have that as part of our schedule and include them into our lesson so they feel part of the school." We're in process of building that now.

The inclusion of this program though, brings to the surface the way Lighthouse has evolved in looking at student learning from a more comprehensive and intertwined perspective. In the face of this inclusion having a potential negative effect on the very scores that have elevated the school to such distinction, Mr. Beacon said:

All the life skill students across the district are here and there's a lot of criticism you know other schools saying "Fine, take them! They lower our NECAP scores!" I had issues here even with some of our staff saying this is gonna bring down our scores and all

the good work and I said “you know what, we don’t need an award to say we do good work here, and you know what, if it brings down our NECAP scores so be it. You know what, at the end of the day we’re doing what’s best for these kids and for all of our kids. Do you know what, our regular ed population can learn a lot from our life skills kids and vice versa. Ultimately, at the end of the day, aren’t we all one community?” Again, you know, you start isolating parts of your community and it’s gonna make you weaker as a community. The things that they’re doing right now, and it’s still a developing program, but the things that they’re doing now is just remarkable. We got another life skills student from another district this year that needs six para-educators in a day and he’s down to two and is functioning. Again that to me is something that should be recognized by the state. It would be easier for you guys to say you know what, we only want to take the top-Tier student. Anyone can do that. Any teacher and any administrator. If I had nothing but A+ students and high economic status students, yeah life would be great and easy but that’s not what we try to do here. Again, it kind of goes back to the philosophy of looking at every student and trying to make them successful. Do we do it 100% of the time? No, there’s always those 10 kids that we’re still trying to reach but we’re always trying to reach them, were not saying “times up, we’re moving our attention elsewhere.” This sounds awful that that would truly happen anywhere but the reality of it is that there is so much pressure on schools these days because you don’t want your name in the paper for being a SINI school. At the same time you know what, we all know that at some point all this stuff will pass one way or the other, and it’s ultimately what do you do in your school that’s important and that’s long-lasting. Because state testing will come and state testing will go, this will come and this will go, this label and that label, but

ultimately I think we're set up better for success in the long run no matter what the measures are. We feel good about ourselves because we know that if there's nothing else, we're trying every day to make it better.

#### **Part IV: Leadership**

Data collected on leadership at Lighthouse will be organized by the theoretical framework on leadership outlined in Chapter 2 (p. 55). This framework parallels the construct of Collins' (2001) Level 5 Leader with the construct of the Transformational Leader developed by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), and applied to schools by Leithwood (1992). This framework, particularly as it relates to Collins' Level 5 Leader, shifts the lens from what are the factors for the school's improvement to *what was the Principal's* role in creating, connecting, or supporting those factors. Data was collected explicit to that role, as well as to the personal characteristics of the Principal and the context of the school. This section will be organized by six major themes from that framework. While key points from the major contributors are listed below under each theme, the analysis will take a more holistic approach with greater discussion of the alignment to the framework in Chapter 5.

##### Theme 1: Mission and Vision Focus

Collins-- The Hedgehog concept and communicating purpose

Burns and Bass Morally-- driven and focused purpose

Leithwood-- Communicated vision and focus on goals

##### Theme 2: Talent Development

Collins-- First who, then what

Burns and Bass-- Intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration

Leithwood-- Stimulating professional development and individual support

### Theme 3: Personal Characteristics

Collins-- Personal humility and professional will

Burns and Bass-- Charismatic and idealized influence, respectful, trusting

Leithwood-- Modeling behavior, motivational, inspirational

### Theme 4: Focus on Results

Collins-- Confronts the brutal facts and results-driven

Burns and Bass-- Communicates high expectations

Leithwood-- High teacher expectations and a focus on student learning

### Theme 5: Culture

Collins-- Promotes a culture of discipline

Burns and Bass-- Instills pride

Leithwood-- Builds collaborative structures and capacity

### Theme 6: Data Outside of the Framework

#### **Mission and Vision Focus**

A recurring theme in the data related to mission and vision at Lighthouse is the filtering of any new initiatives through the lens of “what’s best for kids” and the role Mr. Beacon played in communicating priorities and purpose. According to the EDies application, the stated mission of Lighthouse is:

The mission of Lighthouse School District is to form a partnership with parents and the community to prepare all students to become lifelong learners in a safe environment with high expectations so that they will become responsible, productive citizens in an ever-changing society.

Finding this “zone of purpose” was something Mr. Beacon remarked on in reference to his own coaching background and leadership development. He said:

So that was of interest to me and I found a strong connection between the ability to coach. It wasn't just the X, Y and Z's of coaching baseball or football, but it was also, you know, that commitment to a bigger cause that really seemed to focus me on, well okay, this is what makes this kid tick and a lot of these kids tick. What I found with adults, when transferring over to administration, that adults were kind of the same way, that if you find what makes them tick what makes them push to the bigger good, that's where you're getting somewhere.

Mr. Beacon's development as a mission-focused leader was also influenced by his predecessor, with whom he worked as assistant principal at Lighthouse. He explained:

Again I've known her for six years but I felt like I've known her for 60. She's one of those people, and it's funny talking to staff or talking to community members there's always a cold shoulder towards her, but I really credit her with really changing a lot. It was kind of the haves and the have-nots. She came in and didn't know anyone from anyone and didn't care what side of the railroad track this kid or that kid lived on. In my philosophy also I was always cognizant of the kid's a kid. She really changed that long before I came in. I don't care where you live I don't care your family connection, your cousins of this one or that one, and I think in the past it was very much a who's who and who's not. If two kids were arguing the one on the wrong side of the tracks was probably wrong and she really could care less, still could care less about that stuff.

A key component to Mr. Beacon's credibility in filtering communication on new initiatives through this kid-focused lens was his own background as a teacher and more recently

as the assistant principal at Lighthouse. Ms. Sandollar had this to say about his communication, “He’s a little more I think organized in his look for the future than we had before and I think he can voice that more than what our leader did before.” Mr. Beacon described the role of trust in that communication this way:

As part of the shared vision obviously everyone would like everyone to just jump on board, especially the time I’m coming in I’m the new guy on the block. You know you build trust. Through dealing with discipline and student situations I built a lot of my trust up in that area that then as we got into academics and other areas there was early trust because of, you know, come in and as AP and you’re dealing with the behavior stuff. Now, like last year we shifted to next-generation, I mean very little resistance to that, most people are right on board, trying it, coming to me. I mean our new initiative this year’s STEM, and I thought actually there would be some resistance there because one we’ve built in science time across the building but it’s still a relatively new area believe it or not for them to teach and to be comfortable teaching. So now I’m asking them to build thematic units and incorporate engineering and technology and mathematics into it. I’m very pleased to the point where we’re at right now.

This eagerness to stay “ahead of the curve” has led to the adoption of multiple new initiatives in recent years. Mr. Beacon’s ability to communicate with them within the lens of “kids first” as well as a strategic focus on continuous improvement seem key to the positive engagement of the faculty and continued growth in student learning. He framed the strategic direction this way:

You know you can “rah, rah, rah” and you get people at their highest, how do you maintain that high level of intensity? I feel that you have to mix it up. That you know

when they come back to school in September it doesn't look like when they came back to school this September. I don't care if it's just painting the wall red down there, that there is a noticeable difference because this year's something new and you've got new challenges. I've been fortunate every year that I've been here. The last three, let's say as principal, there's been some big initiative that I've wanted to grab hold of for us that I thought would be a nice fit in here. Whether it was kind of the technology, whether it was the first couple years as assistant principal, okay test scores rah, rah, rah, then it was *image of a grad*, rah, rah, rah, you know and then last year it was kind of year two of *image of a grad* with a couple minor things, some new technology pieces, some new courses, that type of stuff. Then okay even coming into this year it was like all right I'm not doing *image of a grad* three, it's gonna be embedded, but it's not going to be the big kickoff. You know and then the whole STEM stuff just kind of fell into place and that was kind of our big thing and low and behold that excited students, that excited staff, there was something that was a new challenge.

He went on to reflect on the work done so far in the year on the STEM initiative, while shedding light on the strategy to sustain improvement. He said:

You know but I found, you know I can get on the speaker right now and say let's get everyone to go to the gym and I can excite students there for 10 or 15 minutes, but it fizzles. What I found, it's more effective when I can excite the mass of the staff seeing that way. Please today walk through the building. You're going to see science stuff all over. Part of that is to please me, there's no question about it saying "hey this guy is a science guy, I get some brownie points seeing my board," but the other piece is that they're getting into it. They want to display some of their work and again that's a win for

me, you know that's a win for the students because they're all of a sudden engaged in science where they weren't before. You know you go back six years ago and there was very little science going on, you go back three years ago there was very little science going on. Yup, seventh and eighth grade science class, pockets of it here and there, you know fourth through sixth, and very little K-3. Now I got to say almost everyone is doing science every day and everybody's doing science two or three days a week. Not where I want it yet but again we're kind of in that transition and process.

Mrs. Gull elaborated from a teacher's perspective on the faculty engagement with new initiatives and Mr. Beacon's role, stating:

So if there's a new initiative we don't sit back and wait until the governor says, "oh by the way now every single school better have a STEM unit." Not only is Mr. Beacon on the committee, we have to do one this year. We are already starting. So before it comes down and somebody says "you have to" we are on board and he's very clever the way he gets a few cheerleaders and then those people just start standing up and saying "oh I started the STEM unit. This is great. This is what I did. I'll come and help you."

Another recent focus has been the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. Mr. Beacon recalled that the effort on that started years ago, again ahead of the curve. He said:

So changing curriculum, as early as 2010 we shifted to the common core, started piloting and digging in. We were one of the first districts to say "yeah we need to change and this is a great time to change." We were saying that these are more robust standards anyway so we need to do that. So that started happening then. Then you know the first couple of years that was our focus, basically content knowledge, teaching delivery, differentiation,



that's where it was, but then said okay, yet we're starting to see the results and very slowly as our focus was still on the standards started working in there's more to this.

Mrs. Gull qualified the engagement of faculty in new initiatives by emphasizing the importance in connecting them to student learning, while at the same time implying the initiatives that Mr. Beacon promotes are clearly tied to that mission, while some initiatives that are more district-driven are not. She said:

But when it's an initiative that is for, that's going to better student achievement, that's going to help the climate of our building, that's going to help unite the faculty, people are going to be behind it if it makes sense. The grumbling usually happens about things that are ridiculous, honestly, about things that are a waste of time. So no we're not Pollyanna, not everything's perfect, there are some grumbings, but it's about stuff that does not make any sense, to us.

She went on to relate some of the "grumbings" to decisions made at the district level at the District Leadership Team (DLT), which is made up of district level administrators and principals. She said:

I've gone for the last three years since Mr. Beacon was principal and said "what do you think about having a teacher on the DLT so that when you're making all of these decisions I can say (it doesn't have to be me), "Wait a minute that's not gonna work in the regular classroom. You don't understand." So that part bothers me a little bit, talking in terms of leadership. That if you're going to have this district leadership team, if you think that that's valuable, then you need to include people who are in the trenches.

A key component to Mr. Beacon's ability to communicate new challenges with a strong sense of purpose is his ability to empathize with teachers and focus on their own professional

judgement by engaging them in discussions on what is best for student learning. This trust teachers have that they won't be misled was felt and communicated by Mr. Beacon this way:

Yes, all of the red tape and things you must do and have to do. Yes, and that there's still some academic freedom and I don't want to make it sound like they can do whatever they want, but it is in a structured way and they do have a voice as to how we do things and why we do things. There are times that ultimately they don't want to go this way and that but I say that we are going this way and they get on board because I don't do that all the time. They know when there's something that I value that is very important to say okay. I don't know if they say this or what, but the appearance is "okay the principal is pretty fair with us and he thinks this is important so we're gonna go give it our best effort."

You know and that's all I can ask and ultimately that's what I want, you know, as a leader when we need to go down this path that I look behind me and you're all there.

This balance between collective action on established goals and initiatives, and a focus on teacher autonomy and professional judgement, has also contributed to a strong school culture and sense of community. Mr. Beacon pointed out that this contributes to a strong sense of belonging with teachers and an intangible that separates Lighthouse from other places teachers have experienced. He noted:

There's stuff for us to still do to get better at, you know, and I think that and does it ever end? Probably not, but I think that's our biggest thing. Again, we've talked about we're the lowest paid district in the state that people aren't getting compensated like they would anywhere else and we do have from time to time teachers leave us and they're in my office crying in June because they're leaving but they have to do it for their family. They can go to *Blue Oyster* for \$15,000 more or to *Blue Heron* for \$17,000 more and I don't

blame anyone for that. That's a huge impact on your retirement and that's a huge impact on your day-to-day living and supporting a family. I also think there's a number of our staff that had the opportunity to leave that pulled back at the last minute because I think they truly believe in the big vision and I feel good about what we're doing and I feel good about my kids going from September to June with the stuff they have now. That's the one hook that I have. I think ultimately people that have left have come back to report "boy I'm micromanaged I have no freedom in my class. This is what I have to do and this is how I have to do it." The other teachers kind of hear that and say all right we have it pretty good here. We do have some freedoms and we do have a voice and I think that's kind of like that new wave that you're talking about in leadership.

### **Talent Development**

The theme of talent development can be viewed from the perspective of the hiring process as well as the way ongoing professional development is structured for existing teachers. Considerable data was presented in Part II on the hiring process as an improvement factor for Lighthouse. Mrs. Gull adds to previous data on the process of hiring, describing the inclusive nature of the process Mr. Beacon uses by saying:

So there's always a hiring committee, it's not just Mr. Beacon. It's built up of different teachers and it depends. So if it's a middle school teacher, I'm usually there because of BLT, if it's a math teacher then he'll have a math specialist in there, but we're looking for people, we're not only looking for people who might want to settle here but we tend to focus on their enthusiasm for learning and for teaching and for their job.

In addition to supporting an inclusive hiring process, Mr. Beacon expanded also on his view of what they are looking for in a new hire by saying:

When they come in and you're having conversations and you're talking about the classroom interactions with kids, interactions with parents, interactions with other teachers, interactions with administrators, how they buy into a system that they're coming into is probably more important to me than a little thing on their certification that may or may not set them apart from anyone else. It's those pieces, those dispositions of, yeah you have the essential habits and him talking *image of a grad*, you show up on time, you're not gonna know that until you hire a person that they're reliable and that type of stuff, but you can tell from an interview whether they have a little bit of zest in them, if they have a little bit of grit. Have they had a situation where it didn't go their way but yet there sit here at the table getting an interview for a position that they want. So it's those types of things that I really think separates people and that's what I really look for.

There were multiple references to the ways in which teachers are supported in their professional growth, as well as a strategic focus on teacher to teacher professional development. This professional development was seen as focused and coordinated, and also differentiated based on staff needs, often on an individual level. As Mrs. Gull described the school's recent professional development in technology:

Mr. Beacon is like "let's throw it into the next faculty meeting, let's get it out there." People start using it and trying it and then it just kind of filters that way. I think it's his leadership. He knows his faculty well enough to know who to tap. Like she's awesome with technology (*pointing next door*) and she drags me with her. So the two of us are willing to go up there and teach whatever and I'm always up there because of my generation and I'm not a digital native, digital immigrant, and I say that to all of them if I can do it. And they feel that way, "if she can do it we can do it."

In reference to the school's focus on STEM, Mr. Beacon referred often to his belief that professional development should always add to the skill set for teachers, or "tools in the toolbox" as he put it:

If nothing else, if STEM is a fad and it fades away in three years, some of the things that we will be doing will be a tool in the toolbox so when you're teaching that science lesson that you have to teach for the science test or whatever, how might you get this electrical unit across? You might pull out some of that STEM stuff and teach it that way. Same thing with UBD, that was the big saying and then it kind of faded and then it comes back. Same thing here, if nothing else it'll be a tool in the toolbox when you have that year when you can't reach this group, they won't listen to lectures and they can't behave in groups, you can engage them in this. Tools in the toolbox.

Mr. Beacon framed many ways he supports teachers individually and collectively in their professional development, while at the same time being clear about his expectations for their involvement. In reflecting on elementary teachers' level of comfort teaching science, he said:

Teachers, believe it or not, are very good at, but they're scared of the content. They're scared of coming across questions that they don't have answers for and that's kinda when they keep pushing. It's okay, and by all means we have the Internet, worse comes to worse we'll Google it together. It's not like 25 years ago you would have to look it up.

He felt there were very few instances where he would have to get very directive with teachers about trying something new like STEM, and attributed that to a gradual increase of expectations, saying:

Some teachers were able to do the switch quite easily and for others it was very difficult.

With our commitment to working with them and we said "hey year one is gonna kind of

be a pilot that's to work on this. Year two this is basically how it's gonna be, year three it's a nonnegotiable." So to allow some sort of a transition, and again some people took full advantage of the pilot year and said "hey I'm doing this full bore, I'm gonna jump into it" while others kind of resisted it.

He did point out that he could be directive when necessary and had no problem doing so. He said:

It's partly my job to monitor whether that is happening and when it doesn't happen having those conversations, "come on in were gonna talk about this because this is a nonnegotiable. That's not how it's gonna happen, this is what's gonna happen."

Mr. Beacon went on to discuss how he set expectations for teachers, but then stressed the supports he would give to teachers to reach them. He appreciated that teachers felt comfortable enough with him that they would admit when they needed help and seek out his feedback. He gave the following example:

Here it is November, I was observing, just before coming to you, third-grade saying "I'm not comfortable with this, we're doing this, could you do my observation during this so I can get some valuable feedback?" You know in the past it would be "I'm taking a risk doing something please don't come in." Now I'm being invited to come in because they know that the evaluation process for them is more, I'm hoping it's informative and helpful, not a punishment, punitive.

He also stressed that he looks at his staffing decisions with an eye towards the supports he thinks teachers need to expand their practice. He used an example of the library media specialist, saying:

We were fortunate enough two years ago to make a change which at the time wasn't very popular but has worked out to our advantage in a lot of ways. Our library media specialist was in the unified rotation so they do have library once a week and I pulled her out of that so we could have her, we're really pushing research and research skills so I wanted her in the classrooms working during language arts time on research projects and how to research.

The expectations for teachers were clearly focused on fidelity to curriculum and fidelity to a collaborative process to help kids. He spoke to a few recent personnel issues and a comfort level with holding teachers accountable to the expectations. He said:

But with that said they've seen in the recent years of some of their colleagues non-renewed and pushed out because they were, and again you look at, was it because they couldn't teach? Very little. I mean when I even sit back and look at it, it's not really about purely teaching even though there's some questionable things with either student safety or instructional practices, but a lot of it was the resistance to change.

He described the effect on the rest of the staff this way:

Their colleagues saw the level of accountability there too, which I think actually goes a long way. It is saying "okay, overall I think he's a pretty nice guy" but, two, I also want people to know that I'm gonna hold you accountable and I'm gonna work with you to make you accountable. At the end of the day if you say "I'm not doing this" there's another place for you and it's not here.

## Personal Characteristics

It may be helpful to start with a profile of Mr. Beacon. Mr. Beacon grew up and went to college in Rhode Island. After early college experiences in education, he decided to major in Public Administration. As he put it:

I said this isn't for me and my advisor said "you know what, that's good. That's a mature thing to do for a 22-year-old and you're better off now to say education is not meant for me." I said I'm okay, comfortable with that I went to Roger Williams and went into Public Administration, and said that's what I want to do. I graduated with Public Administration and I worked in the private sector for two years.

His experiences as an athlete, and then a coach, helped develop his sense of leadership and also painted a pathway for him back into education. He said:

I'll admit this, I went into teaching because I loved coaching so much that it would give me the flexibility in my schedule that I needed. Then I just fell in love with it and I fell in love with the North Country.

He went on to be a very successful science teacher and coach at the high school level. In his words:

I'd coached for 15-16 years and that brought me to about 30 years old. I always thought motivating, not even the championships that I've won or teams that I've taken from scrap to playoff teams, I have looked at what really made me enjoy what I was doing. It was just kind of leading people down a path that they felt good about themselves at the end of the day. You know and I think I was a very effective teacher and I had a yearbook dedicated to me in my eight years and I was highly regarded as a good chemistry and



physics teacher and got some praise in that area from state-level people and district level people, regional people, but there seemed to be more.

He started to look into administration, but on a gradual timeline. He said:

So it was very easy for me to say “yeah I’m taking administrative courses you know in case that ever becomes an option” without much thought really. It wasn’t you know “as soon as I get this I’m jumping.” It really wasn’t that something, I thought “okay one it would increase my pay as a teacher if I had my Master’s degree, but this might be an option for me when I’m like 50 or 55 for my last five years or six years of my career, maybe jump into that.”

Timelines aside, Mr. Beacon felt a pull into leadership, taking the Assistant Principal’s position at Lighthouse and then transitioning into the Principal’s position. He explained his interest in that transition with this anecdote:

You’re dealing with that, but then you’re getting blamed for decisions that others are making because you’re an administrator. You’re always on the run. I remember having I think PBIS and our SWIS system ready for staff at a staff meeting and then a crisis happened at 3 o’clock as soon as the bell rang and the Principal’s like “you need to go deal with this, I’ll run the staff meeting.” It’s like I had a chance to be an instructional leader for a day and actually teach teachers something. Then there was a crisis at 3 o’clock to last until 5:30 and the staff meeting was over. Next month is the holiday party we will do it in January and it never got done. I spent a lot of time on my nights and weekends kind of putting this thing together and I never got to do it.

As he reflected on his journey and his own found passion for education he said:

Now if I went back and talked to my professor and told him I was an administrator he'd be shocked. He'd be shocked that I'm an administrator, and not because I didn't have the skill but maybe because at 20 years old and 22 years old I didn't have the passion.

Many themes emerged from the data related to Mr. Beacon's personal characteristics as a leader. These personal characteristics, particularly in relation to his interactions with staff and students, were cited to be contributing factors to positive outcomes for staff and students. In particular, data points to Mr. Beacon's ability to empathize with teachers with a strong connection to the classroom through his experience, interactions, and visibility. He also models the qualities he looks for in staff in leading by example, including his modeling of reflective practice. He is perceived by others, and identifies himself, as very kid-focused. All of these qualities have contributed to a theme of honesty and trustworthiness that runs throughout the data and impacts the effectiveness of his leadership.

Survey respondents referred often to the support they felt from Mr. Beacon as well as his understanding of the job they do. One said, "He listens to teacher concerns and sees his staff as professional." Another remarked, "Mr. Beacon checks in with me often to make sure that I am doing well and I feel supported." Still another said, "He is an approachable administrator. His door is always open. The faculty feel they can go to him and their concerns will be heard and acted upon." Mrs. Gull expanded upon these qualities, while pointing out that Mr. Beacon could also balance lighthearted moments with serious work. She said:

His door is always open and you will see, and I know everybody says that, but I see it. I go by and I see people in there and I see faculty just going in and shutting the door and sitting down. One day I said to him, God love him, doesn't matter what it was, I went in and I shut the door and I went "AHHH," just like that and he just grinned and just let me

do it. I thought that was good too because I was just so frustrated and I just had to. We feel we can trust him and that comfort and that trust is there that you could just go in and you can just say what you need to say without worrying about it and I think that helps.

She went on to explain that he strikes this balance in staff meetings as well, saying:

He makes us feel valued because he doesn't waste our time and he makes us feel valued because it's okay to have fun for a few minutes and it's okay to laugh. It's okay to be silly. So our faculty meetings are like that, he'll joke around with people. He picks on the BLT a lot because he knows us maybe better or whatever, but he does that and to me that's really, I think that's great. I really do. I really like that he has this personal relationship with all of us and I feel that I can go in and I can talk to him about anything.

She went on to sum it up this way, "Mr. Beacon is really good, he strikes that balance between let's have fun and laugh, but let's get done what we need to do."

Mr. Beacon recognized the importance of his background and experience as a teacher in his interactions with his staff. He said:

Yes, some of my strengths come as we talked before from my experience in coaching and kind of being in the shoes as a classroom teacher for nine years at the high school level. I understand the push and pulls from the classroom standpoint, you know and I think what also gives me a lot of credit around here is my engagement with students.

He went on to expand on the descriptions others had of him, saying:

I think overall people know that I put in a lot of time, and will know that I'm always here and I'm always there for them. I think they see me as someone who is engaged with the students. You know I'm pretty high-energy and can be funny at times but also there's a

serious side to me and they know when something's not going well that needs to be fixed that it's being addressed.

Mr. Beacon also found ways to show respect for teachers through his flexibility in scheduling their time, saying:

I think overall I don't have the ability to pay people more for their hard work but I can supplement it in other ways like with time, or that "hey the best time to meet with me to discuss an instructional issue is four to 6 o'clock." Giving them time and not structuring every minute of their day has been kind of a benefit I think that most of them have kind of picked up on.

One of the strongest themes that emerged from the data describing Mr. Beacon was his clear modeling of high expectations and his message that he wouldn't ask anyone to do something he himself wouldn't do. Surveys pointed in this direction as a theme, with one respondent saying, "He is smart, creative, hard worker, firm but fair. He has high expectations for us as well as himself. No one works harder." Another pointed to his role with the NECAP improvements, saying:

He has led by example. He is a key "coach" during our NECAP pep rallies. He is in the hallway each day of testing encouraging our students. He is a cusp student coach. He sends newsletters home to parents to inform them on the assessment and their role in helping us prepare for the exam.

Another said, "He leads by example. He has a positive energy and is a great "coach" to his staff and students." Another pointed to his kid-focus, saying, "He leads by example. Allows teachers to have a voice but always keeps best interest of students at the forefront." Other survey respondents added more to the modeling their leader does, with one describing him as,

“Involved, funny and always gets the job done.” Another described him as, “Positive. Strong. Involved” while adding, “Principal is very visible throughout the day and very positive. A strong leader.”

Mr. Beacon made it clear that his modeling of expectations was deliberate on his part. He said:

There is that measure of accountability that I think we all have to strive for. I think it gets into that philosophy that you know when someone’s not willing to commit what happens there and what avenues do you take there? That’s kind of the broad general piece that has always guided me. I kind of lead by example in the sense that there will be no one who puts in more time and hours than I will.

He also cited this as something he saw the former principal doing, which he also recognized as her modeling of expectations. He noted:

So as far as leadership I think that my former principal is someone, I also had on a positive note she was the principal here when I was assistant, she had a positive impact and continues to have a positive impact on me, she was a hard worker and put in hours upon hours upon hours.

He went on to say:

So whatever it took to get the job done in the here and present, she was very good at it. There was never a time when she said, like “you know it’s 3 o’clock and I’m out of here.” If it took us to be here till 7 o’clock at night to solve an issue so our next day would start off to a good start, that’s what we did.

This modeling of behavior also helped Mr. Beacon draw people in to working together on a common goal, as opposed to defaulting to an adversarial position. He noted:

I think holding people accountable was things I saw very early in my coaching career that still carries over. You know, there's that tendency to be viewed as either a people person or a hard ass, and trying to find that mix as well. I think my philosophy is it's much easier for me to work with you to get you going in that direction, and as long as you have that attitude that says "I am willing to look at things differently," whether it's to give me feedback or to say "I think you're totally wrong but here's where I'm okay with that."

He also noted that even in tough conversations with staff he found ways to make it as comfortable as possible for them, and emphasized the respectful tone of those conversations this way:

Sometimes it's levels where they can't, or need support to reach it, and other times when they are just basically not going to do it and kind of forcing your hand so I get that. I get that probably more now as administrator than I did as a teacher, but I do get that. My office isn't always the spot for that you know, again a great place to have those tough conversations is in their classroom at 4 o'clock in the afternoon saying "hey, we're setting up a meeting and I'll be down at four." One, they feel that they're in their zone, and I can assert my administrative hat whether it's in my office or in their classroom, wherever, that has never bothered me that I needed the comfort of my office to exert that.

Mr. Beacon went on to describe his staff interactions as characterized by his intent for "honest conversations." He noted:

I think I'm pretty open and honest with people. Sometimes I'll hear some criticism that I'm too honest, but I'd rather be too honest than to keep secrets and that kind of stuff. I usually let people know where they stand with me you know and things that I may need to work on and strengthen.

He went on to note that those conversations often help clarify expectations and responsibilities, saying:

We've also brought in a lot of people and put teachers in the decision-making role to help us navigate things day-to-day, and that's new for them I think. Before they, you know, I've had conversations and staff meetings the last couple of years about really, it's hard, people always say "I'm a professional I can make decisions" blah blah blah and then given the opportunity you look at me and say "just tell me what to do." I'm not gonna do that. I'm gonna trust you to do what you need to do.

He expanded on this stance and the role of trust in making decisions in the school, saying:

I think that's still a process and we're still getting there. We're not there yet but I think it's something that's important that these are all educated people, these are all experts in their area of teaching and their content area. Again, they need to know that the ones that have earned my trust, which is the majority of them, that we do trust them, and again whether it's dealing with the classroom behavior or a parent.

Aside from his straightforward, open and honest approach, and his modeling of expected behaviors, one of the characteristics that was often noted in Mr. Beacon was his ability to inspire kids and his strong focus on connecting with kids. As already noted, Mr. Beacon was a strong presence in classrooms. He described his method for visibility as:

This is a big building you know, so in about an hour I can, by going in there for five or six minutes, good morning, what's going on, listen to the morning message a little bit, I can usually get through about three or maybe four grade levels in an hour. So what I try to do is I'll do primary one day and then tomorrow I'll do kind of third and fourth and then five and six and then finally seventh and eighth. So if I had my time like I wanted it

I'd have an hour every morning, it would take me four days to get through all of the classrooms.

In addition to the noted visibility and interaction with classrooms, as well as his personal greetings to students coming and going from school, Mr. Beacon went “all out” when it came to pep rallies. As Ms. Sandollar noted, “He gets up there and pretends to sing like he’s some rock star. Kids really got pumped up for all that.” She went on to note the difference in leadership when he took over for the former principal, saying:

I think for him when he took over we definitely saw different personalities of the two leadership roles. He’s more kind of bubbly and excited and kind of get the kids you know geared up and going whereas she didn’t have that. She left it to other ones who could do that during an assembly and do those kind of things, but he’s really taken over that role and they see him in that light, in a different light than just a principal. So I think he kind of makes it fun for the kids you know, he knows the kids well, and that was a shift as well.

Perhaps the personal characteristic most evident in the interviews with Mr. Beacon was his ability to reflect on his practice and grow as a learner himself. This quality came across to the staff as open-mindedness as already noted, and as one survey respondent put it, “Our principal is very approachable and open to ideas that can help our students succeed. This kind of flexibility allows for new ideas that best support our students.” Mr. Beacon reflected on his own learning and development as a leader as a window into his open-mindedness, noting:

Yes I’ve tried to pull pieces from many different administrators I’ve worked with that I had as a student and that I had as a teacher. We had six different superintendents in my eight years in my last district and I’ve seen how some of the things I liked about this one



and that one and kind of make it my own. I am who I am. I think it's most important that I'm comfortable with it instead of trying to be somebody else. I am who I am but I take some of their thoughts or their qualities into my thought process to say "hey could I incorporate that?" That's a really nice piece of the puzzle. I feel I'm kind of weak in this area so how could I kind of do some of those things not changing who I am but incorporating that into my thinking.

He recalled this type of reflection emerging during his years coaching, saying:

So just like in my coaching ideas, you know I would see or play for a coach and take some pieces here and I would see or play against the coach or coach against another coach that I really like these pieces and same thing as an administrator.

He also reflected on how those coaching experiences influenced his leadership, reflecting, "A lot of my leadership qualities came through the realm of coaching and motivating players through coaching." He went on to say, "I found a connection between motivation and performance."

Lastly, Mr. Beacon was clear to express his own strong sense of personal responsibility for gathering input but being the ultimate decision maker. This sense of responsibility was connected to his observations and learning from his predecessor. He said:

My first year was kind of navigating "I'm going down with the ship" and the Principal right from the get-go had always trusted me and wanted my insight, but if I thought this and she thought that, we went that. She understood that ultimately it's gonna come down on her head, which I still carry over to today.

He went on to say:

I like to discuss things and get some feedback on things but ultimately if my gut feeling is telling me this is the way and I have to go this is the way, we're going because ultimately I'm the one that has to answer. Again, she taught me that.

As he expanded on this responsibility of his, he also expended on his view that the students are best served when those decisions are made with strong involvement of the staff. He said:

It takes a team and we do a good job, and I think that's part of that trust where I need my teachers to look at things and give me information to try different things in order to have all of this happen.

He expounded on the intended message to teachers this way:

I'm sure I do some of the things that I don't want to do, or it's perceived that way, but I try to look hard. Ultimately at the end of the day whether it's next year at this time, 10 years from now or whatever, the people will say "you know what he cared a lot, he got the best out of me, you know and I really felt like I was a contributor to the entire school. It wasn't a one man ship."

He further detailed what he would hope people would say about him by noting:

Ultimately they know the yes or no comes from me but "I felt good enough to go and offer my advice. He listened to me and made decisions based on the data, based on my opinion and based on my experience and based on my trust." You know those are the kinds of things that are important to look at and it's kinda like that old cliché that it takes a village. I try not to run it as a one man ship even though I make it very clear that things that we do I'm ultimately responsible for so I need to be informed, I need to have the discussions. Nine times out of 10 when we have a discussion about something that didn't

go well and I wasn't informed we are able to talk through it and tweak it to where I think this is worth trying and it works.

### **Focus on Results**

Mr. Beacon was consistent in his references to results in student learning as a guide for school improvement efforts. Building off of the theme of “confronting the brutal facts,” poor student results provided the catalyst for early work with teachers. He recalled:

No one was happy or pleased when we were, 65% proficient, sixth-graders in reading. That just wasn't acceptable. It was back in 2009 coming in. So we needed to shift, we needed to start shifting at the curriculum level. There were non-negotiables.

This shift in curriculum was key to aligning expectations with results. He noted:

Switching to the Common Core was one, saying we need a more robust kind of cross-curricular and embedded curriculum than just teaching standards in isolation. The second piece to that was getting our teachers up to speed in that content area or with the Common Core and that was kind of our backbone to all of it.

These expectations required leadership that could frame this shift in terms of better results for students. As results started to show signs of improvement, Mr. Beacon shifted to refining strategies to push a wider range of students, not just students in great need of support. He said:

So we created the intervention block where every kid would get some type of intervention. Whether that's the right name for it or not that's what we ended up doing. So special ed kids would get their services, that was their service time, Title I kids would get their service time, the midrange kids that might not be, that they're not serviceable as far as IEP's or Title I but are struggling in math and language arts that was our next Tier that we targeted and took them out. Then we found that there was a group of students

usually like we have in sixth grade we have 60 kids, seventh-grade we have 60 kids so about 120 kids, so then we find that there's like 30 kids or so between seventh and eighth grade that had all A's and B's, doing what they're doing, didn't have any real deficit, so we created an enrichment block.

He expanded on this push by using an example:

They would do a project out by the river on looking at sedimentary rocks, using a project in town to kind of build a STEM project around. That's what I want the enrichment to be about, not just collecting water bottles and sorting cans, want it to be engaging and I want those kids in enrichment working as hard as those kids in special ed programs during that time. So that's kind of my push now.

He further detailed the importance of involving teachers in looking at results and monitoring progress of all students by talking about their work in defining student learning objectives (SLOs) saying:

As were developing SLO's and stuff like that, we had some great discussion around you know what would we target for growth, how do we know this group is successful or not? Is it a proficiency rate, is it a percentage of growth? You know so we started having those conversations around that topic as well but my first part was because we have in every classroom now about five or so kids in every class that are in that well above average range, which is great, we've always wanted that but what are we doing to keep them there?

This constant focus on results and push for continuous improvement has become part of the culture at Lighthouse. As Mr. Beacon said often, "How do we push it to the next level"?

## Culture

There were multiple references to the impact leadership has had on the culture of Lighthouse, noting the impact on culture began with Mr. Beacon's role as assistant principal. He referred to his then guidance counselor, now current assistant principal, as a partner in that effort. He said:

He was a guidance counselor when I first started as assistant principal, kind of my right hand man as we tried to clean up the school. He was here a couple of years before I came in so he kind of knew like things weren't going well. There was a lot of problems and school culture issues. So I think cleaning up that mess and my role of assistant principal with the help of others, and the staff eager to kind of change that, that was the first step I think in pushing us forward educationally.

He went on to remark on the reputation of Lighthouse then as he recalled the reaction of others when he accepted the assistant principal position. He remembered being told:

They roll through administrators, the quality of educators is not good there, they're lowest paid all over the place, and there's a high suicide rate among students. So you can go to any other nice community but never go to that district. I remember colleagues of mine were just horrified and said "no kidding there's an opening in Lighthouse District. There's always an opening in Lighthouse District for a principal or assistant principal."

He went on to explain the effect that lack of consistency has on staff, and the benefit of the more recent consistency of leadership, saying:

So when that happens I think teachers lose faith in the system. They have a new boss every other year. They went through their range of superintendents and a range of principals and assistant principals, everyone is uneasy. One of the things you look at the

last six years your superintendent's been the same person, I've been here six years, and that just in a kind of weird sort of way eases people.

Mr. Beacon further expounded on the shift in culture as it related to the discipline in the school over those early years, noting:

A lot of heavy lifting went through a three year period where things are much better. Even the police coming over, our local PD coming over, saying "everything okay? You guys just shoving things under the rug?" I said "no behaviors are actually much better," expectations are that kids know what they need to do where before they were kind of testing and things were kind of unraveling. I think we had at one point 14 kids in the court system. We have nobody right now and we had no one last year. Again that's just one measure, but for the most part you know things are okay overall, globally much better. I think it's just knowing where the line is and I think it's just knowing where kids are making mistakes but they're not making big mistakes. They're not deciding to bring the gun to school or not deciding to bring a knife to school. I think that's made a big impact.

This long term shift in student discipline and school culture is something Mr. Beacon takes pride in, and also attributes some of his quality of interaction with students to his perspective as a parent, saying:

I still have, I mean a connection to kindergarten students, connection to eighth grade students, and again part of it is I see my own kids and I want them to have that relationship that you don't come down to my office only when you're in trouble. We hand out many more rewards during interactions of my office than we do discipline, you know.

Mr. Beacon detailed his intentional efforts to connect with students and be visible in the classroom, saying:

Both myself and the assistant principal, we are actively teaching even though we're the administrators. Whether it's a sixth-grade science lesson or a kindergarten STEM project I think our teachers see us engaged in that way that we just don't sit in an office and deal with the things that we have to deal with. You know, we do have to do them from time to time and make sure, so there's that balance of you know we don't ignore our regular duties but at the same time every free moment we have is spent in the classroom engaged with students.

Perhaps the greatest factor in influencing the culture of the school, particularly among teachers, was the intentional expansion of shared decision making and teacher leadership. As Mr. Beacon put it:

So one of the things I feel like we've done the last three years is empower teachers by having a voice. It doesn't mean they get what they want all the time, it doesn't mean they're just free to do, but they do have an active role in the decision-making process that we do.

Survey respondents often referred to formal decision making structures, such as the case with one saying, "Our BLT (Building Leadership Team) regularly meets to discuss issues brought to them by our unit meetings or vice versa." Mr. Beacon gave some background on the Building Leadership Team and his intentional shift in how that team is used, saying:

We've changed the format of our building leadership team meetings where before it was informational. So two years ago when I took over one of the things I had done was, building leadership was usually identified by the building principal, you will be a

building leader, you will be, you will be, you will be. So I actually put it out that anyone can apply and I'm doing it like an application process, and for the most part that went very well, I mean you had a handful, maybe 10, and there's five BLT members, so you know there were discussions and I interviewed people or had a conversation with people and we came to a consensus of this the direction we're going in and this is why.

He continued to connect this new format to the strategic rollout of initiatives for school improvement saying:

You know some of them were teachers that were new to the profession, three or four years of experience and you had someone else in that unit that applied that had eight years and was ready to take on more. The other thing is the BLT used to be informational. I'd sit here and talk about everything you need to go and report back to your unit, kind of like that old style staff meeting. I'll tell you what you need to know. Each building BLT rep now has a task that they are kind of put in charge, where they consult with me outside the BLT. So one of them, who is our 5-6 rep, she's in charge of STEM. So we formed a STEM committee and she's the facilitator of that. We meet on a weekly basis to kind of review how we are moving along with that.

He saw this sharing of responsibilities having a positive impact on the teachers' sense of shared ownership of decision making in the school. He said:

So they actually have an active role and they feel like they're a leader, and they do a good job of kind of checking in with me, keeping me in the loop, I make suggestions. They go back to their subcommittees, but they're actually leading instead of just secretaries and dishing things out.



Mr. Beacon noted the positive effects of the shared decision making even when he ultimately makes a decision that goes against the wishes of some. He said:

Some will say I don't have enough of it, they don't get their way enough, but I try the best I can to explain why we can't use your opinion and I had to go in this direction.

Some of them, I think the majority of them appreciate that even when they don't get what they want.

This emphasis on the professional responsibility of teachers was a shift for some who were used to the principal taking charge and making decisions for them. Mr. Beacon noted that instead of people expecting him to solve all issues, he looks to them to solve them first. He noted:

They say they always hate it when that goes to the principal first and are spoken to by the principal about an issue that they wish they had a chance to resolve it, and they are given that opportunity now. And it's a struggle sometimes for them because they're not used to being put in that position. They say "wow I get first crack at this to solve my own problem without having someone come tell me how to solve my own problem." So you know we've talked about that and that's something that we're still growing as a staff and that's something that doesn't come easy. So I think that's been a big plus.

He also noted the trust he has in them to make the right decisions and to keep him informed.

Speaking about the use of data he mentioned:

We do really try, you know I'll spend a lot of my time reviewing data in this and that but actually crunching the numbers we trust our reading and math specialist who are very dedicated to doing that so we probably trust more here than you would see in other schools in our district. I don't feel like I have to micromanage everything. We set

deadlines and we have meetings and we do that and people go out and do the job and come back and we discuss it and we make a plan from there.

Mr. Beacon was keenly aware of the pressure points for teachers and the factors that could lead to a lack of motivation. Speaking of some of the ongoing challenges in the district he said:

We're the lowest paid district in the state so when you talk about the motivation piece that's hard because right from the get-go people are unmotivated and we've gone through times early on when I first came into the district it was in disarray and that was the thing, it was kind of work to rule without calling it work to rule. At 3:10 PM contract time "I'm out of here unless you schedule me for a meeting and then I have to stay because the contract says I have to."

He went on to note the positive impact all of the work over the last few years has had on that motivation and his understanding of teacher perspective, saying:

So there was a lot of that early on but you don't hear as much of that anymore, it's very far and few between. The nice thing I think it's to a point now where if I went to a particular teacher and said "I need you tomorrow night from 3 PM to 6 PM" they'll say okay "I'll be there" because there's always been that trade-off where "he doesn't ask me to do it unless there's a real reason to do it."

He went on to suggest his respect for their time is evident to teachers and a contributing factor to their motivation by saying:

Same thing with you know, I'm one that we have our staff meeting set and if I can bump a staff meeting because we don't have things to discuss that are global in nature then we won't have it, but when I need to call one because something has come up at 7:15 in the

morning they're all there. So I think they also realize that I value their time just like my time's valuable their time's valuable. When we're ready to discuss, we're ready to present, we have things to inform them about, that's when we have it.

This respect for time and what teachers do was evident to teachers and contributed to their positive outlook on the administration. Mrs. Gull recalled one such occasion:

He called us together, the BLT meeting is always the week before and he said "you know what guys I don't have anything. I'm canceling the staff meeting." I said to him afterwards "you have no idea the morale in this, seriously something as simple as that, the morale in this building just went through the roof" when I was able to go back to my team and say we don't have anything we're not having it.

She went on to note Mr. Beacon's ability to understand and relate to his staff extended to his way of interacting during meetings they had. She gave the example:

I can't remember exactly what the icebreaker was that Mr. Beacon used that we started our meeting with, but for the first 45 minutes we laughed. It was just this activity that he did and after it was all over, and we still did our agenda and got our stuff done. I went up to him afterwards and I said "what a difference to sit there." You know you sit there and you see everybody after the summer and we are as a faculty, we're laughing together and having a great time for the first 40 minutes instead of what the district does because that's what responsive classroom is. That's what part of it is and that's what this administration does well.

All of these effects on the outlook of teachers and the culture of the staff help to motivate them to take on new challenges. This fact is not lost on Mr. Beacon as he considers how to keep a very good school improving. He noted:

We're kind of always trying, and it does, it's like "another thing principal? Haven't we done enough?" Yes, we have done enough but that's the thing about education, we can't just stay in the same place. There's always better ways, there's more to learn.

He came back to his push for STEM, noting:

Because again I understand the hesitation a lot is "I don't know much about this. It's kind of dark and scary over there and let's keep doing what I'm doing." We're doing great in reading or doing great in writing were doing great in math, you know and again I don't want to change just doing well in those areas, I want to enhance, because we know in education if you stay with the same thing too long it fades, you lose. I can see it happening already across the district because we've had such a push and we've done some great things and we moved the mountains but now it's okay if we have an off year, it's all right. We've got enough of it entrenched now that we should be good.

He stressed his strategic use of teacher leaders as well as his own presence and limitations in helping keep the innovative work going, saying:

Again you know I can lay out and say this is how we would this, but then it fizzles in a couple months, you know STEM's on the back burner. But when they come up with "all right what do you want do with this?" You know they're talking of a STEM day in April and May, that gives them a goal of doing that. They're trying individual projects to get some feedback, so that's you know I want to create some excitement, and to create excitement for students. You need to excite the teachers because that's where it's happening, you know that's where it's got to happen. Sure I can hold my monthly whole school assembly rah, rah, rah, they walk out and you ask them at 2 o'clock what was that about and they say I don't know but it was pretty fun.

### **Data Outside of the Framework**

There was considerable data outside the Theoretical Framework that may shed light on the unique nature of the context of Lighthouse, or perhaps the nature of leadership at the school level within a broader district structure. There were many references to the balance and interplay of school and district leadership. Survey respondents noted “We’re going in the right direction now. The district developed the main mission and vision and then we work with it at our level in the unit, grade level and classroom” and “The district has worked well together to make this district very successful. I believe it has been communicated through our Superintendent and Principals and also by our achievements in academics and sports.”

This synergy between the school and the district was referenced often in conversation with Mr. Beacon with evidence of his intentional filtering of district initiatives to communicate what he thinks will resonate with his staff, while also careful not to overload them. He said:

There’s always the pressure on the teachers to do more here, do more there, and in a lot of ways I do act as a filter. You know when we started pushing the *image of a graduate* this was a big initiative that we started three and half years ago and this was something I felt was very valuable that fit what we need here as well and we did push that. There are other things that get pushed down the plate all the time that you know eventually might still come to the surface, however the timing’s not right and we kind of back off.

This selective emphasis Mr. Beacon put on district initiatives was intended to find success in meaningful work, while also filtering those things through school values. This became more difficult when district initiatives did not fit with the current work in the school. Mr. Beacon illustrated:

I'll give you one example, the health and wellness committee put out guidelines of teachers can't have classroom parties, if they have a classroom party it can only happen at 2 o'clock, and blah blah blah. We kind of, you know, kind of block that portion because you know we didn't feel it was being abused and we didn't feel that it was something that, all that it was going to do was create a bad environment at the time. We were talking about that last year December, January, February which historically are the toughest times for staff, which I call the black hole month, my January staff meeting is usually about the black hole month.

He went on to say the timing of that conversation was instrumental to any success:

But it's getting through these kind of dark months that can be tough. You know we talk about seasonal depression with students all the time and teachers are kind of very good at recognizing that with students but it's hard to recognize that in themselves. So we bring that to light and we discuss it, and for instance that was something that I kind of put on the back burner until April and May and then it was well received at that time of year.

Mr. Beacon went on to describe his thought process in communicating priorities to his staff when sharing district initiatives, including how much information to share with them and when, saying:

They know, a lot of our teachers have been in the district a long time and they know a lot of things have been pushed out from the district. The stuff that we end up talking about at our building level, about things that are going on district-wide that we need to get on board even if we don't agree with. I think through explaining the reasonings and trusting them with information I have that's not breaking confidentiality from the district, really sharing that information about why this is important and why I think this is important for

our school. I think that's a key piece which every district wide initiative that we have brought forward the last three years has been very well received including the *image of a graduate*.

He went on to identify the success of these initiatives unique in some ways to Lighthouse when compared to other schools in the district, noting:

You know when we explain that, and you know there was a lot of resistance in other buildings in our district with that, and they're still not fully on board not all of our schools are on board but I can say this building is. Again, I think part of that is because they get the full explanation. They got the details of why it's important district wide but also why it's important here and I think they've seen the results the last couple of years with students. You know we see it in the SWIS data we see it in our attendance records we see it in our failure rate. We see the results of their work and embracing this initiative.

Mr. Beacon also explained how his own personal comfort level with some initiatives and his connection with the staff helps him feel confident exercising some degree of autonomy when it comes to larger initiatives. Such was the case with STEM, as he explained:

One of the things we've done a very good job of the past five years is getting ahead of the curve. For some reason or another, and you asked a question earlier how do you balance the district initiatives with your own initiatives that's a perfect example. I have several on the district leadership team that are balking at STEM and going forward on STEM, and we're kind of moving forward independently on our own on this not to the pleasure of some of the group. I feel like as a building leader I should have some of that

autonomy to go forward with. My superintendent is absolutely behind me, but he's having a hard time getting some of the others on board with it.

He further articulated the responsibility he has to make those decisions, even within the district context in saying:

I just consider myself very fortunate that things have turned out the way they are and is it deliberate? I'd like to think so. Is it a reflection of me as a leader? Yes, but I also understand the balance between or that fine line between having this conversation with you versus being on the other side and having this conversation with the superintendent because we're failing. How the state analyzes scores and how performance, we're learning more and more that today we're a reward school and tomorrow we are a SINI school again. So ultimately the last year or year and a half I've said I need to do what's right for me, meaning our school.

This level of autonomy was not only driven by the responsibility Mr. Beacon felt for the school, it was also enabled by the Superintendent, Mr. Tide, in deliberate and implied messages Mr. Beacon received from him. Mr. Beacon used the example of the *Image of a Graduate* work, saying:

Out of there we do, I mean I feel the last five years since Mr. Tide's been here I've had a lot of input on district initiatives, one of the big pieces at the district level is what we call the *image of a grad* and we really work that in here. He's let us kind of work that into our buildings how we feel best kind of suits that.

He went on to explain the synergy between the school and district, and between himself and Mr. Tide, noting:



You know as we kind of progress through this that a lot of the things we have done over the last six years have been district wide things but our take on district wide things. It might look different in other district schools and Mr. Tide has done a nice job of letting us do that. You know we talk about the *image of a grad*, he's not telling us how to implement that, but saying "hey, this is something that I think is valuable do with it what you need to do with it." We've taken that here and done this with it where another school they don't have a news broadcast but they're doing something else that's working there. I like that because it's not cookie-cutter, it's not one-size-fits-all but it is kind of moving towards the same you know goal, mission, vision, values that we do find as a district, that's important but not being told how to do it, how to implement it, or "hey you've done enough slow down or too much of it." You know and I think that is one because I don't think my hands are tied as a building administrator that you know yeah this is all great stuff but I didn't have anything really to do with this. Even if we developed it sitting around the DLT table that we're doing something unique here as well as everyone else's doing their own unique thing.

For his part, Mr. Tide also spoke to this intentional structure again using the *Image of a Graduate* as the example, saying:

The interesting part is we talked about them and defined them and then I said okay in your buildings I want you to foster them. I don't know how you do it, and it's different by building by building by building, but the direction is the same. It's the stressing of the importance of the dispositions and the habits as well as the abilities in content. It's just talking with kids in getting them to realize how important something like grit is or curiosity, optimism.

This balance of a guiding framework with autonomy at the building level seemed to provide guidance but also to spark creativity and innovation. As Mr. Beacon saw it:

Mr. Tide really gets us thinking. He's very creative and always looking forward, which is nice. Some type of vision and usually he lays out these big projects for a district leadership team and allows us to go back to our school and kind of develop our own ideas. He's a lot of fun. Good visionary but he doesn't micromanage.

He went on to sum up this critical synergy this way, "You can never underestimate the support of the superintendent, I mean having the trust of the superintendent is really what makes the difference for me at this level."

In concluding this section on leadership, it is worth noting that Mr. Beacon's reaction to this study and his reflections through the Seidman's (2013) Phenomenological Interviewing Method also provided a window into his disposition and personal growth mindset. About the interview process, he said:

I think ultimately at the end of the process any feedback you think you could give me that would help me in the long run, you know whether it's leadership style or things that we're doing here and say "hey have you ever thought of or considered that?"

He expanded this to a stance about school improvement in general, saying:

I think we don't do a good job in the educational field of sharing what's working well and giving ideas to others. Again, I hear a great idea and I see something to be great to bring to my school and I tweak it because I see it in a different location, my dynamics are little different and my resources are little different.

The study seemed to resonate with his beliefs of sharing quality practices based on successful results with his reflection, “You know I think some of the best things we do in education we keep secret.”

## Chapter 5

### Analysis, Interpretation, and Synthesis of Findings

The purpose of this case study was to explore the perceived contributing factors leading to increased student achievement in a school meeting the criteria of a *Reward School*. These factors were to be compared against factors cited by Collins (2001) in his analysis of companies that had improved from *good* to *great*. Secondly, this study was to explore the connection of those measures of improvement with values staff had in relation to what is perceived to be most important and meaningful in student learning. Lastly, the study was to explore the characteristics of leadership in the school and compare the operational leadership in the school with Collins (2001) Level 5 Leader. Specifically, the research questions were:

1. How do the perceived enabling factors for school improvement by teachers and administrators in identified Reward Schools compare with Collins' good-to-great framework?
2. How do the indicators of success that are most valued by teachers and administrators in these schools compare with the indicators that define their identified status as great (i.e., a Reward School)?
3. How do the characteristics of the leadership in schools that have been designated as *Reward Schools* compare with Collins' construct of Level 5 Leadership?

The analysis of the data in this chapter will be organized into analytic categories directly aligned with the study's research questions and the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2. The purpose of this chapter is to provide interpretative insights into the findings presented in the previous chapter.

## Conclusions and Discussion

### *Analytic Category 1: Perceived improvement factors*

The improvement journey at Lighthouse was deliberate. The impressive gains in student achievement did not happen by chance. They did not happen through good intentions. They happened through deliberate actions and reflection on results. Perhaps one of the greatest connections between their story and the story of good-to-great companies is the practice of *confronting the brutal facts*. Almost all data pointed to the genesis for the dramatic gains in the designation as a School in Need of Improvement (SINI). The factors most cited in enabling the initial gains on the NECAP were the increased ownership of the staff and the increased motivation for the students. The poor performance on NECAP was met with a dual message of “we know we’re better than this” and “we need to find ways to increase student learning.” If the conversation only went as far as “these results are not valid for what we know about our students” then the NECAP pep rallies and the increased focus on the test would have probably led to initial gains as well, but to sustain that improvement trajectory, staff at Lighthouse had to also confront the challenge of finding ways to continue to adapt to the needs of students and monitor their progress to higher levels of learning.

Another key contributing factor often referred to in the work at Lighthouse that aligns closely with Collins’ (2001) framework was the clear focus on results. This was evident in the way teachers described the purpose of their work as continually focused on student learning as well as the structures in which they worked, such as data teams and intervention groups. It was abundantly clear that they found that close monitoring of results in learning at the student, classroom, and school level was critical to the success of their work with students. This focus on

results also became the cause for school wide celebrations and an emerging culture of pride in the school. It was also referred to multiple times by the principal and teachers as a focus for decision making on scheduling decisions and the structure of intervention time.

The focus on results also contributed to another alignment of factors with Collins' (2001) framework in the area of a *culture of discipline*. It was clear through all data collected that staff at Lighthouse had a disciplined focus on their work with a clear understanding of individual responsibilities as members of a team focused on student needs. This disciplined culture was most evident in the team structures at the school. While staff did not identify those structures with any established team model, such as *professional learning communities* (PLCs), their disciplined practice of using data to inform their instruction was very much in line with the practice of PLCs. They did identify their school's philosophy and structure for interventions for students as aligned with a *response to intervention* (RTI) model. This established model of practice uses a very disciplined approach to looking at data through data teams and matches student needs with appropriate interventions. This model was referred to often as teachers described their efforts to "catch kids up" as well as efforts described by the principal to challenge students who are already doing well. This attention to the needs of each and every student clearly took a very disciplined approach to setting up systems with staffing and schedules that could respond to those needs.

Collins' (2001) construct of what he termed the *hedgehog concept* focused on the convergence of mission focus (what can we be best in the world at?), a strong sense of value (what are we deeply passionate about?), and a strong understanding of a path to prosperity (what drives our economic engine?). In his own application of his theory to the social sectors, Collins

(2005) re-termed the focus on economics, or profit, with the allocation of resources or the question “what drives our *resource* engine?” At Lighthouse, there was a strong sense of mission in their unrelenting focus on student learning. Unlike a private company however, which may be able to choose what they can be best in the world at, Lighthouse’s mission was much more closely tied with what they felt they *should* be best at. There were multiple references to meeting the educational needs of all students and to personalizing the educational experience, that is to say, connect with students on multiple levels. This was clearly an area of passion for the staff, with many references to personally helping individual students succeed. That was evident in the purposeful structure of intervention, as well as the personal cheerleading of what they called “cusp students” on the NECAP test.

Another lens into this mission-focus is what staff at Lighthouse chose *not* to focus on. Mr. Beacon described himself as a filter to protect teachers from suffering from “initiative overload.” He gave the example of the classroom party policy on sweets. In what seemed a slight contradiction, he and teachers also referred many times to the pride they had in “getting ahead of the curve” on initiatives coming from the state and federal government, using examples of STEM and Common Core. The difference in their excitement over those initiatives was in how they saw them connected to the strategic mission and success of their students.

Unlike companies, or even other non-profits or social sector entities, schools do not generally look at driving a *resource engine* for the purpose of sustaining their mission. Probably the most critical resource in the eyes of teachers and in the work of school improvement is *time*. There are many ways in which the leadership at Lighthouse strategically used time. One of the most referenced factors in the improvement of NECAP scores was the shift in the schedule at the

school to administer the test. Specifically, condensing the schedule down to three days instead of over multiple weeks allowed for a focused and concentrated use of resources and energy on the part of staff and students. In addition, the use of time in the daily schedule of students for teacher collaboration and student intervention was ranked by Mr. Beacon as the greatest lever for improvement. This goes along with the addition of time in the instructional day itself. Mr. Beacon made multiple references to the length of the day at Lighthouse being significantly longer than other schools.

To the extent that the resource engine component of the Hedgehog Concept applies to schools from a fiscal perspective, it probably applies best at the district or School Administrative Unit (SAU) level. While budget considerations are of course a factor at the building level, most of the strategic work of resource allocation happens at the district or school board level. That aside, there were multiple comments on how the success of the school impacted the perceived message to taxpayers about the “return on investment.” Mr. Beacon had pointed out that in the years where student results were poor, and the reputation of the school was poor, it was very difficult to get the school budget passed in the town. Since the dramatic improvements in student learning, the reputation of the school in the town has gone up considerably and they have had an easier time with budgets. Still, there were multiple comments from teachers and the principal about the relatively low teacher salaries, noting them as one of the lowest in the state. This was interestingly brought up as both a frustration as well as a point of pride, with a message about a morale purpose in that “we’re not in it for the money.”

Collins (2001) uses the term *flywheel effect* to describe the mechanism for continuous growth in good-to-great companies. This is described as the attainment of a tipping point in



growth where systems adapt to new challenges and improvements are sustained and built upon. This effect is also similar to what Argyris (1976) described as *double loop learning* and Kegan and Lahey (2009) describe as *adaptive change*. While it may be slightly premature to claim the flywheel effect is in full operation at Lighthouse, there were many indicators that the improvements being put into place were leading to change on a systems level and that those changes were making greater improvements possible. A good example of this is in the intervention block with students and continuous refinements made in instructional strategy and grouping to meet student needs. Another key aspect of this is the strong focus on results not only guiding the identification of student needs, but also in validating successful strategies with students. This notion of success breeds success was referred to often, not only in marking progress of improvements, but also in fueling the desire to try new approaches. This seemed a key factor in the staff taking on new initiatives as potential levers for continuous improvement as opposed to feeling weighted down by the burden of “one more new thing.”

There were other areas where data from Lighthouse did not align as well with Collins’ (2001) framework. While Mr. Beacon had pointed out that he looks for teachers to come in with new ideas to add to the collective intellect of the staff, other participants stressed hiring teachers who have experience with specific programs at Lighthouse and “fit in” with established practices and culture. There were also comments that a key trait was to be familiar with the North Country and able to handle the winters and relative isolation. All of these findings paint a more scattered picture of what is valued in new hires than Collins (2001) found in his work, specifically that his companies searched for strong innovators first.

Another area that seemed to represent a loose connection with Collins' (2001) theory was the role of technology as an accelerator of progress. While companies using technology benefited from greater efficiency of time and cost, Lighthouse's use of technology seemed to focus on creating an instructional environment conducive to "digital natives." There was no doubt that technology use by students, such as with the Chromebooks or Google, was designed to better connect and engage students, and was tied to the improvement of their learning, it was not cited as a primary factor in the school's journey of success. One area of teacher use of technology that was closer to an intended efficiency and improvement of practice was the intentional focus of professional development on technology tools. These ranged from teacher planning tools to instructional tools, and although the district placed value on these trainings through the awarding of "track hours," they were not cited as major contributing factors to the school's impressive gains in student achievement.

There were also factors for improvement cited by the staff at Lighthouse that diverge from Collins' (2001) framework. These factors tended to relate to aspects one could argue are more specific to schools than to companies. One of these factors that will be examined in greater depth in a subsequent analytic category is the interaction of leadership at the school and district level. While CEOs do have boards to answer to, it is a very different leadership structure and dynamic between a principal and a superintendent. If the parallel is made between school success and private company success, then the limitation is that companies operate much more independently than schools within a school district. References were made often to initiatives in the district and how Lighthouse existed within the context of the broader district. Rather than have this be a hindering factor, it was the opposite as it seemed what was unique about

Lighthouse was the way staff embraced many external initiatives by weaving them in to existing values and structures, such as the case of the *Image of a Graduate* work.

Another important factor in the school's success that has no obvious parallel with Collins' theory is the role of professional development in driving student success. While loose connections could be made, the role of professional development as a mechanism for individual teacher growth as well as organizational and team growth, was much more prominent at Lighthouse than in good-to-great companies. In fact, it would seem the diminished alignment of the "first who...then what" factor for improvement would be complementary to this emphasis on professional development. That is to say, instead of a focus on hiring the perfect candidates who will bring the best innovations, Lighthouse was focused on finding candidates who could operate in a successful team, but continue to grow and learn. This value of open-mindedness was stressed by Mr. Beacon as having even greater than the value of bringing innovation in the hiring of new teachers.

### ***Analytic Category 2: Values in student learning***

One of the important distinctions in the study of a school as compared to the study of a private company is the assignment of value to the indicators of success. Few in a company would likely argue with the profit of the company being of high value, or with profit a valid indicator of the company's success. Further, profit is the obvious motive in decision making by leaders of the company. The case of Lighthouse presents an interesting parallel because the indicator used to identify the school's success was also narrowly defined. It was defined by student performance on the state accountability test, the NECAP. This identification as a Reward School by that indicator opened up an opportunity to examine the value placed in that

indicator and the perception of it as a valid indicator of student achievement and growth. What developed was an interesting narrative on the evolution of mindsets on valid and valued indicators of student learning.

Interestingly, part of the initial reaction to being labeled a School in Need of Improvement (SINI) was to doubt the validity of the measure as an accurate representation of student learning. Rather than attack the test however, the staff at Lighthouse decided to pursue ways to *make it* a more accurate indicator by raising the investment of teachers and students in the test. Teachers referred often to the early talk among their peers discrediting the test and the work then done to take it more seriously. This seemed to be the first shift in mindset among teachers on the indicators for student learning.

As teachers began to assign more value to the NECAP and to the results, they started to draw more connections and integration of what was tested on the NECAP with what was taught in their classroom. Rather than straight “test prep,” they created thematic units weaving NECAP themes in with their curriculum in meaningful and engaging ways. This process of integrating curriculum was the second shift in mindset among teachers as they not only acknowledged the importance of the results, but they also saw the connection of them with what they taught and valued already in their classroom. This shift is what opened the doors to a variety of other strategies for engaging students in the content and for developing structures for focused interventions with students at all levels. This process seemed to build on itself as students saw greater and greater success on the NECAP and other assessments. The staff at Lighthouse seemed to “hit a stride” as they continued to align and focus their practices on this ever

improving indicator of student performance. Not surprisingly, over this time the NECAP grew in acceptance as a valid and valued indicator of student achievement.

The third shift in mindset seemed the most profound. Partly out of a developing interest in finding new challenges and partly out of an ever-present but growing sense that NECAP did not represent all that was valuable in student learning, the district and staff at Lighthouse began work to define in clear terms what was most valued in student learning. This effort to develop a clear picture of the “*image of a graduate*” seemed to resonate deeply with a staff that had put so much effort into a narrow focus on “tested content.” This work was inclusive and thoughtful. Not surprisingly, what rose to the top for qualities of a graduate included knowledge, skills, and understandings in all subject areas, but it also included less tangible but no less important qualities. These included essential habits like reliability, punctuality, and responsibility. They also included necessary abilities like communication, collaboration, higher order thinking, and problem solving. Finally, these included dispositions, with qualities such as grit, zest, optimism, self-regulation, curiosity, and social intelligence. These qualities were fostered at Lighthouse in a variety of ways, from student led events to a new student-run news broadcast.

Interestingly, the *Image of a Graduate* work did not serve to replace the value of NECAP with something else. If anything, the work served to put the value of NECAP in context of all that is valued in student learning. Mr. Beacon had expressed some reservation that shifting away from what he identified as a dominant focus on NECAP would lead to lower student scores. What they found was the opposite. This served to validate both the systems for student success that had been established as well as the belief that creating more of a balance in what is valued would be better for student learning all around. Staff at Lighthouse quickly began to integrate all

aspects of these values, including leveraging the messaging of values like grit to students for the purpose of encouraging persistence through the NECAP test. By Mr. Beacon's account, because of the success Lighthouse had, these values were more quickly and easily integrated as part of a functioning system for student learning. Teachers also commented that they welcomed the balance of what was valued in student learning and the new focus seemed to spark greater degrees of creativity in what they did.

This evolution of mindsets of what is most valued in student learning may be instructive to the broader work in schools to place state accountability tests in context. The improvement journey at Lighthouse would seem to suggest almost a hierarchy of needs in being able to establish that context. That is to say, when student performance was very low on the test, the staff at Lighthouse rallied to have immediate impact on those results, as if they needed to shore up the basic skills for students before they aimed higher. Once those results began to rise, so did the level of collective efficacy on the part of the staff. This seemed to lead to a greater willingness to take on new challenges and to "aim higher" for student learning, both in terms of levels of proficiency as well as depth of knowledge. This work fed into the *Image of a Graduate* work and established a much more robust set of qualities in students and values in student learning. One would wonder if that evolution could have occurred had the school not put "its house in order" first.

### ***Analytic Category 3: Leadership***

The examination of leadership at Lighthouse revealed many similarities to the theoretical framework on leadership as well as some notable differences. This examination will be structured in a similar way to how the data was presented in Chapter 4. That is to say, the

themes of mission and vision focus, talent development, personal characteristics, focus on results, and culture will be explored and tied to the theoretical framework on leadership. There will also be an examination of findings outside the framework.

### **Theme 1: Mission and Vision Focus**

Having a strong sense of mission and vision for an organization is a key component of Collins' (2001) *hedgehog concept*, as well as a focus for the Transformational Leader (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Leithwood, 1992). Burns (1978) describes this focus as morally driven and Leithwood (1992) applied this to schools by focusing on the leader's ability to build consensus on meaningful goals. At Lighthouse, it was clear that the staff had consensus on the goals for student learning, both on a school wide level as well as on an individual team level. The mission at Lighthouse clearly focused on meeting each student where they are and helping support them academically and socially to be successful. This was operationalized through their regular meetings focused on the needs of kids and personalized attention to student success.

Whereas Collins' (2001) hedgehog concept described what successful companies did to continue to narrow their mission and vision to what they could be best in the world at, or their market "niche," leaders at Lighthouse seemed to do the opposite. While the beginning of their improvement journey was marked by a very narrow, even singular focus on NECAP test results, what fueled their continued success, and what increased staff motivation, seemed to be the broadening of focus to include social dynamics of students and broader definitions of what was valuable in student learning. This more comprehensive and "richer" educational experience seemed to go hand in hand with an openness and interest in taking on new challenges, even if they were outside the original narrow focus.

## **Theme 2: Talent Development**

While Collins (2001) focused on the “first who-then what” principle of hiring and talent development, Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) focused more on a Transformational leader’s intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration of followers. Leithwood (1992) followed up on those principles in schools citing Transformational school leaders’ need to give individual teacher support and stimulating professional development, with a strong focus on instructional quality.

While Mr. Beacon did talk about his interest in bringing in people who will add to the knowledge base of the current staff and who will bring in new and innovative approaches, there was, nonetheless, a theme of bringing in folks who “fit in” with the culture and priorities of the school, with teachers in particular stressing that experience with established programs was of value. In this respect, the data deviated from the theoretical framework particular to Collins (2001). That said, there was clearly a theme of building leadership focusing on stimulating professional development and individualized support for teachers. Part of the success of the model at Lighthouse was the empowerment of staff to offer professional development for their peers. In this respect, the leader utilizes a more distributed style of leadership with a strong focus on instructional quality, coming closer to the qualities Leithwood (1992) attributed to Transformational school leaders. Also, as he suggests, these leaders develop the collective capacity of the staff and their ability to collaborate effectively.

Interestingly, school and district leaders at Lighthouse also utilized external motivators for professional development as they instituted what they called “track hours” to reward initiative on the part of teachers to participate in district-directed professional development.



Teachers expressed less investment though in offerings at the district level than they did for in-house professional development at the school level. Mr. Beacon also expressed some concern that for a number of years professional development outside the district was discouraged. These findings indicate that Mr. Beacon did not always perceive himself as the leader of professional development, but rather felt constrained by district directives. That being said, a hallmark of his leadership was his ability to frame potentially negative decisions in a positive light as he focused more on the power of peer to peer professional development.

### **Theme 3: Personal Characteristics**

Collins (2001) was specific in defining a few particular personal characteristics of Level 5 Leaders. Primary among them was their personal humility and professional will. He further describes that the Level 5 Leader is quick to accept blame if things go wrong and also deflect praise to others when things go well. Mr. Beacon clearly exhibited this when he referred multiple times to his strong sense of responsibility and his ultimate decision making “the buck stops here” mentality. He was also quick to give praise to others for the school’s success, notably the representatives on the Building Leadership Team. While he made no claims of humility, it was clear from the interview data that he put the interests of the students and of the school ahead of any personal interest or ambition. His professional will was also evident and came through in how teachers spoke about him. It was clear from them that Mr. Beacon was committed to the school’s success. A good example of that was his filtering of any scheduling decisions through the lens of how they can help meet the needs of all students. While selected strategies for intervention may have been teacher driven, it was a non-negotiable that there would be intervention.

Burns (1978) characterized Transformational Leaders as *charismatic*. This characteristic was not present in Collins' (2001) findings for Level 5 Leaders. In fact, he noted the absence of that trait and attributed the success of the companies to the intentional lack of focus on the charisma of the leader, finding in comparison companies that once the charismatic leader leaves, the company struggles to adjust and loses momentum. In this study, Mr. Beacon exhibited some aspects of a charismatic personality, particularly with students, and in stark contrast to his predecessor. That said, Mr. Beacon seemed less inclined to motivate staff through a charismatic personality. Instead, he sought opportunities to empower staff and to place staff strategically in building leadership roles, such as his transparent process for inviting new Building Leadership Team members.

Leithwood (1992) also found the ability to motivate and inspire were key qualities of Transformational school leaders. He also noted that these leaders modeled the behavior they expected of their staff. Mr. Beacon was very intentional in the way he modeled behavior. He referred multiple times to his work ethic of "no one will work harder than I will" and "I wouldn't ask anyone to do anything I wouldn't do myself." This came through to the teachers with their noting his strong work ethic. Further, his active role in getting into classrooms and modeling instruction as with the STEM examples contributed greatly to his ability to motivate and also empathize with teachers. These were critical factors in his earned respect among the teaching staff.

Aside from the theoretical framework, a personal quality that came through clearly was also his ability to laugh with his staff, encouraging light moments while also staying focused on the work. His humor was appreciated by staff and was taken as a sign that he has a good

understanding of, and rapport with, his teachers. He had built a clear level of trust with his teachers to the point that even when he had to be more directive with them, they trusted that he was well-intentioned.

#### **Theme 4: Focus on Results**

Collins (2001) found a theme in Level 5 Leaders that they “confronted the brutal facts” and rallied their employees around them for improvement. The story of improvement at Lighthouse is truly a story of a school that chose to confront the facts of low performance scores of students. Rather than assign blame, they took action. Mr. Beacon was clear in his focus on results and that theme was reflected in evidence from teachers as well. What started as a source of concern turned into a source of pride as they saw positive impacts on the NECAP test scores. This focus on results seemed to lead to what Collins’ termed the flywheel effect as the success of students was so dramatic that it quickly led to a greater sense of confidence or efficacy on the part of the staff to make an impact and to want to keep the improvements going. This led to greater levels of innovation and systems change.

Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) noted that Transformational leaders communicate high expectations to followers, while Leithwood (1992) applied that to schools to find that Transformational school leaders communicated high expectations for teachers, while also keeping a laser focus on student learning. This focus on results for teacher performance as well as student performance was the norm at Lighthouse and clearly communicated by Mr. Beacon. The focus on results was also demonstrated in the NECAP pep rallies and the NECAP results celebrations. In doing so, this results focus extended even beyond Mr. Beacon and the teachers

to the students. This became a main source of identity for the whole school and a clear point of pride.

### **Theme 5: Culture**

The focus on results at Lighthouse was also tied to the overall culture of the school. Collins (2001) found that Level 5 Leaders promoted a *culture of discipline*. This was characterized by all staff knowing their responsibilities and having a sense of mutual accountability to the success of the company. Findings from this study showed that the staff at Lighthouse felt a strong sense of mutual accountability and were very disciplined on how they approached their work. This was seen most clearly in the formal structures of the grade level teams, the data teams, and the Building Leadership Team.

Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) found that Transformational leaders affected the culture of their organizations by instilling pride in their followers, while Leithwood (1992) found that Transformational school leaders intentionally built collaborative structures and focused on building collective capacity for teachers to work together. While not self-identified as a professional learning community (PLC), the staff at Lighthouse had a strong value of collaboration and effective teamwork. Again, this was seen clearly in the multiple team structures in the school. Their success had a positive impact on their pride in the school and their capacity to effectively work together was driven by a common goal of increasing student learning. Mr. Beacon played a key role in supporting those structures and respecting the time necessary for teachers to collaborate. This empathy for the pressure points for teachers contributed greatly to their trust in his decision making. As an example, teachers noted that he didn't call them together to meet for the sake of meeting. If there was no pressing business at

hand, he would cancel a staff meeting. Conversely, if there was a need to meet but no scheduled meeting, teachers trusted that it was important to meet and did not complain about their time. Overall, acts such as this contributed to a positive culture built on purpose and respect.

Another finding related to culture was the significant increase in the pride of the community in the success at Lighthouse. This pride contributed to a positive culture, and also contributed in more tangible ways to the support of the school in the community. This support ranged from donations of snacks at testing time to greater involvement of families in school activities. This community support is in contrast to the view of the school before the improvement, with perceptions of a failing school and low morale and culture.

### **Theme 6- Findings Outside of the Framework**

While there were many ways in which the findings on leadership at Lighthouse were closely aligned with the theoretical framework, there were, nonetheless, findings that did not align to the framework on leadership. These findings point to what may be unique about the leadership at Lighthouse or what may be unique about the role of principal in the context of a district such as Lighthouse's. The findings that appear case-specific may relate to Mr. Beacon's personal background in science as it relates to his leadership of the STEM initiative, while the findings that may apply more broadly relate to the leadership dynamic and synergy between Mr. Beacon and the SAU leadership structure.

While the work at Lighthouse with STEM was not part of the initial improvement strategy, as it only came into play in the last two years, it nonetheless provides a unique window into Mr. Beacon's leadership style and self-perception as a leader. Mr. Beacon saw himself as

the resident expert in the area of STEM. He spoke often of his background as a science teacher and of his involvement with the recent Governor's task force on STEM. If there ever were to be an area where he could be prone to be directive about what teachers should do and teach, STEM would seem to be it. Rather than choose that approach, he chose to again build support in a small number of teacher leaders and then to empower them to foster innovation around the initiative. He took responsibility for communicating that STEM is important and that he saw the potential for Lighthouse to be a leader in that area. He also used STEM as an opportunity to support teachers individually with his own expertise and even more importantly, "roll up his sleeves" to model lessons in classrooms and walk the walk with teachers.

This example sheds some light on the ways in which Mr. Beacon nurtures a sense of empathy with teachers while also communicating priorities and purpose in their work. It also sheds light on his continuing effort to build teacher leadership and empower teachers professionally to make decisions. This clearly contributed to teachers' motivation to take on and adapt to new challenges. Whether it was critical or not for him to have that area of expertise to be able to communicate with teachers is unclear, but it clearly helped him frame the purpose of the work and use his own high self-confidence with the subject to reassure teachers of their ability to grow in the area.

Perhaps the most significant finding outside of the theoretical framework is the finding that relates to management and communication regarding district vs. building level priorities and values. This balance by Mr. Beacon, and his thoughtful communication to establish purpose in what may otherwise seem like an external mandate, was a critical factor in establishing the continuous improvement mindset at Lighthouse. Unlike Collins' (2001) Level 5 Leader as CEO

of a company, principals like Mr. Beacon are leaders within the broader context of district leadership. Collins (2005) did attempt to relate his construct of Level 5 Leadership to the social sector by describing the skill set needed by leaders in the social sector as more based on *legislative* skill as opposed to *executive* skill. This would apply to Mr. Beacon as much of his effectiveness was driven by his ability to relate to people and find ways to navigate various interest groups in messaging the focus of the work at Lighthouse.

While Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) focused on the Transformational leader's ability to build consensus on a vision for the organization, they did not extend this to how these leaders translate a vision coming from outside the organization. Mr. Beacon, like many principals, had to communicate the mission and vision of the school within the broader context of the district. What emerged as a finding in this study was that Mr. Beacon was very intentional about how this was done. He described his thought process in situations where the impetus for change was external as being centered on the context and values of his staff. While Mr. Beacon was quick to credit Superintendent Tide with his flexibility and willingness for schools to adopt district initiatives as they best fit the school's context, the focus here was on Mr. Beacon's thoughtful and deliberate approach as to how to best leverage district initiatives for the school's improvement. This was seen in his promotion of the *Image of a Graduate* work as well as the STEM work. It was also seen in his reticence to promote the Wellness policy work limiting sweets in schools. In each of those decisions, Mr. Beacon was clear to connect the initiative with what was of value in the school and in student learning, as well as to be sensitive to the context of the staff and to what would serve to motivate and inspire.

## Summary of Findings

Findings from this study can be summarized by a review of the theoretical framework with indicators for the degree of alignment based on the analysis of the data. Each of the major factors in the theoretical framework are given a value in the tables below of Low, Moderate, or High alignment with the findings of the study. Findings as aligned to Collins (2001) in this case consider Mr. Beacon's role in supporting all elements of the good-to-great framework. Collins referred to the Level 5 leader as the "glue" that keeps all other elements together. In addition to the alignment of findings as they relate to his personal character, this chart considers the alignment of his influence on all other elements.

Table 5.1 Findings Alignment with Collins

<b>Good to Great Level 5 Leader (Collins)</b>	<b>Lighthouse Findings Alignment</b>
Communicates mission and purpose (Hedgehog concept)	High
Identifies and develops talent (first who, then what)	Moderate
Personal humility	Moderate
Professional will	High
Confronts the "brutal facts"	High
Promotes a culture of discipline	High
Results-driven	High
Sets successor up for success	Moderate
Uses technology to accelerate progress	Low



Table 5.2 Findings Alignment with Burns and Bass

<b>Transformational Leader (Burns and Bass)</b>	<b>Lighthouse Findings Alignment</b>
Mission-driven Morally-driven	High
Intellectual stimulation	Moderate
Individualized consideration	High
Charismatic/Idealized influence Inspiration	Moderate
Communicates high expectations	High
Instills pride	High
Respectful and trusting	High

Table 5.3 Findings Alignment with Leithwood

<b>School Application (Leithwood)</b>	<b>Lighthouse Findings Alignment</b>
Develops widely shared vision Builds consensus on school goals	Moderate
Provides stimulating professional development	Moderate
Provides individual teacher support	High
Modeling behavior	High
Motivates teachers/inspirational	Moderate
High teacher performance expectations	High
Promotes positive school culture	High
Clear focus on student learning	High
Builds collaborative structures and capacity	High
Focus on instructional quality	High

While all three of the contributing elements of the theoretical framework align well with the findings at Lighthouse, the factors described by Collins (2001) seem more applicable to the school as an organization than they do to Mr. Beacon as a Level 5 leader. In Collins' description the Level 5 leader seemed more unique to the corporate world, particularly in what he saw as surprising findings of humility and care for the greater good of the organization. Schools may themselves be different enough of a context to make those findings unique to high performing school leaders. The findings aligned to transformational leadership, particularly as applied to schools by Leithwood (1992), seem to represent Mr. Beacon's leadership to a much greater degree. While Mr. Beacon's leadership style may not be characterized as highly charismatic, the motivation he was able to achieve through empowerment of staff and communication of purpose seemed to have the same influential effect on others.

## **Recommendations**

While the clear limitation of this study was that it examined one critical case and therefore a case in a singular context, there nonetheless were compelling findings to advance recommendations that may or may not be relevant to all other contexts. Other contexts may demand other considerations for leadership and other challenges. Also, while the story of improvement in student learning at Lighthouse had a relatively clear beginning, other schools may be at different stages of improvement. The most compelling aspects of recent improvement at Lighthouse, particularly in the areas of professional empowerment, may for example be the most relevant to schools truly trying to go from *good* to *great*.

### **Recommendation #1- Focus and Monitor**

While the “what” may be context-specific, the need to focus on something to monitor for improvement is a critical element to any school improvement journey. This recommendation is deceptively simple. Schools are not always set up to measure their own success. Many schools are made up of very dedicated leaders and staff members who work very hard day in and day out without monitoring in any regular way the effect of their work. Unfortunately, this leaves schools more vulnerable to having their success measured only by the singular external measures of improvement, such as the state test. While the old adage is true, you don’t fatten a pig by weighing it, the story of Lighthouse illustrates you don’t know how much to fatten the pig unless you weigh it once in a while. It is the combination of choosing an intended goal and monitoring progress. This is by no means a new recommendation in education, but nonetheless it is the core of the success story at Lighthouse.

Principals need to help direct that focus and follow through on the monitoring of progress. Leaders play a critical role in guiding the work of teachers by supporting time and structures for that collaboration. The other key role Principals play to help guide a strong focus is to limit distractions. This may be easier said than done in an environment where there seem to be multiple competing initiatives, but as Mr. Beacon identified, principals can act as *filters* for competing priorities. His intentional choice on what he promoted as a focus for the school helped send the dual message of “what we’re working on” as well as “what we’re *not* working on.” Principals need to be transparent about these choices with staff to reinforce the empathy for what’s on a teacher’s plate.

The other outcome of clear focus and effective monitoring is the ability to celebrate success along the journey. Lighthouse is a clear example of how success can breed success. Taking the time to examine results of interim measures not only helps diagnose next steps for instruction and intervention, it provides a critical opportunity to celebrate what's working. This intentional focus is what builds a disciplined professional culture in the school.

### **Recommendation #2- Empower Good Systems**

The critical element that moved Lighthouse from a “jump start” of improvement by increasing ownership in the NECAP test to actual improvement in student learning was the establishment of systems to support the learning of *all* students. Lighthouse is a great example that empowering good systems is different than adopting good systems. That is to say instead of declaring that the school would organize as *professional learning communities* (PLCs), Mr. Beacon supported teachers in organizing in collaborative teams as focusing on the needs of kids as they looked at student learning data. While there were no “PLC binders” on the shelves of teachers, they were *operating* as a PLC.

It is hard to say how critical of a distinction that was, but at the least it protected the work from seeming externally sourced and perhaps created more of a sense of authenticity in teachers. The heart of the recommendation here is to build an effective system focused on the success of *all* students. Lighthouse did identify their work as being based on a *response to intervention* (RTI) model, but Mr. Beacon was intentional on the level of choice left up to the team on how to best meet individual student needs. This intentional empowerment of professionals, while being clear on the focus and purpose of that work, is what can lead to the continuous improvement and adaptability of the system.

### **Recommendation #3- Conduct a Values Check**

The improvement journey at Lighthouse is a stellar example of a school's evolving discussion of what is most valuable in student learning. It is critical in an environment of test-based accountability that what a test measures is put in a context of what is valued in student learning. As was the case of Lighthouse, that does not mean diminishing the importance of standards of learning that are tested. It means describing the learning of the *whole child* and seeing how other dimensions of learning such as the social dimension, can actually improve academic performance.

This recommendation is even more important in a landscape of shifting and evolving state standards and the challenges schools sometimes face from the community. Mr. Beacon identified no community push back to the Common Core State Standards, but there are many other communities where there is greater concern as to “where the standards are coming from.” Placing these standard in the context of what is valued locally is a critical step to communicating what is important in student learning. It is recommended that even in the absence of any external pressure to examine what is of value in student learning, schools should develop a practice of conducting a “values check” to re-establish focus and purpose in student learning, such as the district Lighthouse was in with the *Image of a Graduate* work.

### **Recommendation #4- Lead with Empathy**

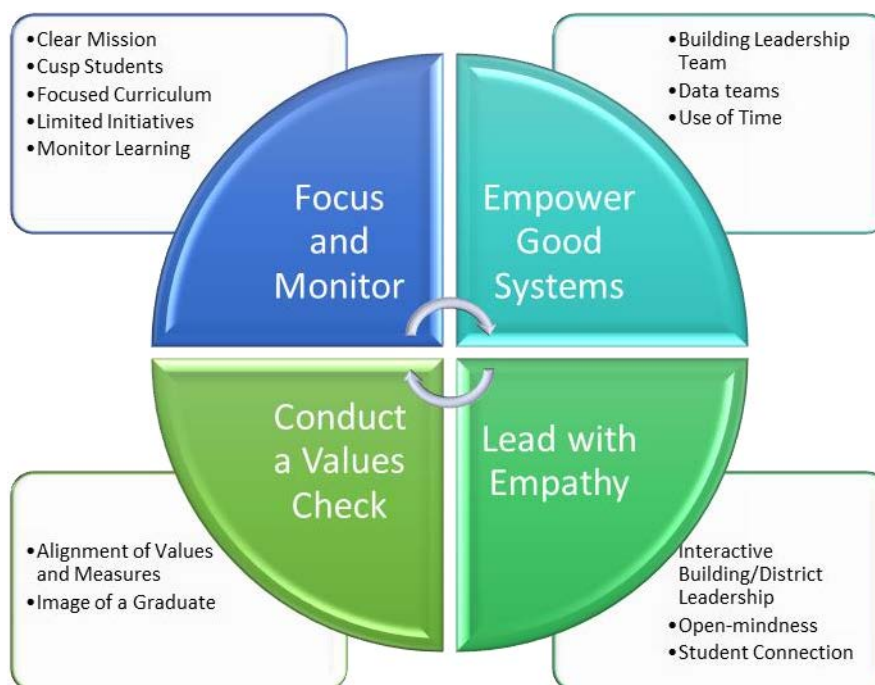
While there are many aspects of effective leadership that Mr. Beacon displayed, and a wide base of knowledge in the theoretical framework, the glue that seemed to hold it all together was the ability of Mr. Beacon to connect with teachers. The heart of that connection was his

ability to show he understood what was on their plate, the challenges they faced, and the everyday commitment necessary to be an effective teacher. He was clear about high expectations but also knew what it took to reach them. The refrain in the message he gave to teachers seemed to be “I know I’m asking a lot, but this is important and I’ll do it with you.” This modeling and ability to recognize their effort seemed to build trust between him and the staff.

Principals can express their empathy with teachers in a variety of ways. As Mr. Beacon did, probably the greatest expression is in the valuing of their time. Any time used to bring teachers together should be purposeful and focused. It is helpful to minimize the perception of time wasted because teaching is such a time intensive profession. That is to say, there is always more that can be done for planning or student feedback. Honoring that time spent collectively and acknowledging the time needed individually is one of the greatest ways principals can express empathy. When this empathy is coupled with high expectations and focused purpose, leaders have an opportunity to motivate their staff to achieve great things.

Figure 5.1 represents the findings and recommendations from this study viewed through the lens of the experience at Lighthouse. This is not to say, for example, that the only way a school can have a process to focus and monitor student growth is through the identification of “cusp students,” but rather that the methods employed and perceived as effective at Lighthouse can be organized through the four recommendations from the study.

Figure 5.1 Lighthouse Leadership for School Improvement



## Implications

It is of course cliché to talk about change being the constant in public education on the one hand and yet stagnant performance as a nation on the other. The implications raised by highlighting a school as a critical case may lie not so much in Lighthouse as a model but rather in Lighthouse as an example of *how* various theories of leadership and improvement can be put into place in a school setting. While improvement strategies certainly need to fit the context of particular schools, context differences can't become the excuse for not looking deeply at established examples of success. The default premise on the part of many sometimes seems to be "well it can't work here." That premise can be shifted to "how would it work here."

As Mr. Beacon said, some of the best things we do in education we tend to keep secret. Whether it is due to schools operating under a general cloud of humility, or that they are too busy

or not motivated to spread their good work beyond their walls, it is fair to say there is no norm among schools for open sharing of what is working. Federal and state policies tend to reinforce the need to be hyper-focused on what is not working. Implied in this study is a need to shift that policy stance to a stance that builds a growing web of best practices, truly scaling up to excellence instead of pulling up to adequacy.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study can only be seen as one voice in a growing conversation about scaling up excellence in public schools. Further research is needed to add to that conversation. The obvious need is to go beyond the singular critical case here and explore other contexts of improvement, whether they be different geographic contexts, size, student populations, socioeconomic status, or political environment. To gain a fuller picture of excellence in schools, more schools with a similar improvement journey should be explored.

Further, this study was intentional in choosing a school deemed successful by one single measure. Further research should explore excellence by multiple measures, including non-academic measures of performance. It would be helpful to the literature base in informing public policy to have more examples of what excellence can look like and the factors and conditions that enabled their improvement. For example, an ambitious future study could examine more closely the matrix for improvement highlighted in the McKinsey report (2010) and overlay the factors for improvement outlined by Collins (2001) as applied to a similar set of high performing systems internationally.



These future study directions should help inform educational policy on a number of different levels. By gaining greater clarity on the most critical factors for school improvement, federal, state, and local policies can be aligned to the most powerful levers for improvement. Policies can also be differentiated based on factors most relevant in the context of the school. For example, if turnover in administration is most prevalent in a certain set of schools, policies can be differentiated to focus on support for stable leadership.

Lastly, it is suggested that further research be done on a school like Lighthouse over an even longer period. It was fascinating to see the evolution of the work at lighthouse even over the five or so years of recent improvements. It would be instructive to continue the study of that evolution over a longer period and continued challenges. For example, this study examined the improvements on the NECAP assessment in one New Hampshire school. As schools in New Hampshire transition to the Smarter Balanced Assessment, and/or the new work on the Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) system, it will be interesting to see how schools identify their successes and put them in context of what is valued most in student learning. It will also be interesting to see how school leaders message and enable purposeful work in their schools.

### **Closing Summary**

This qualitative study examined the perceptions of staff on the contributing factors and leadership necessary for improved student learning in their school. Examining a critical case allowed the opportunity to take a deep dive into the perceptions of teachers and the principal regarding their roles in contributing to that success and the conditions necessary for furthering that improvement. This success story can be viewed as one school's journey from *fair* to *good*

and then from *good* to *great*. This journey was then compared to Collins' (2001) "good to great" model and the leadership and the role of the principal was further compared to the characteristics of a Transformational leader described by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) and applied to schools by Leithwood (1992).

The work of school improvement is complex. Examining the contributing factors for a critical case of school success and comparing those against established theories of leadership and improvement is important not only in understanding the application of those theories, but also to showcase examples that prove "it can be done." Just as the staff at Lighthouse had to go from dismissive to greater ownership of results, from scattered to focused, and from isolated values to holistic values in student learning, so can all schools. With a growing base of research on highly successful schools, policy makers as well as state and national educational leaders can create a pathway to excellence.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Invitation to participate**

Dear Named person,

I am a student in the Southern New Hampshire University Educational Leadership Doctoral program under the direction of Dr. Margaret Ford. I am writing to ask you if you would be willing to take part in an interview to gain your perspective on leadership in successful schools.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to investigate effective models of leadership and other contributing factors to school success in continuously raising student achievement.

During our meeting I will give more details about the types of interviews, the questions asked and my assurances to you. There is a list of these assurances at the end of this email.

I hope that this will be a useful piece of research which will inform successful models of school improvement. I would very much appreciate your help.

Regards,

Stephen Zdravec, [stephen.zdravec@snhu.edu](mailto:stephen.zdravec@snhu.edu)

Assurances to interviewees:

If you agree to an individual interview anything you tell me will be treated in confidence.

In all instances:

\* I will respect your right to decide not to answer any questions which I may ask you, and without explanation

\* I respect your right to withdraw from the interview at any time

\* I may wish to use quotes, but would only quote you under a pseudonym and with your express permission

## Appendix B

Project Title: Reward School leadership: Building a good-to great cycle of excellence

### Informed Consent Agreement

**Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.**

**Purpose of the research study:** The purpose of this qualitative case study is to investigate effective models of leadership and other contributing factors to school success in continuously raising student achievement.

**What you will do in the study:** As a participant in the study, you will be given details regarding the research and an opportunity to consent. You will be interviewed by a researcher in regards to your perspective on leadership in successful schools and contributing factors for school success in raising student achievement.

**Time required:** The study will require three non-consecutive hours of your time.

**Risks:** There are no anticipated risks in this study.

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The report from this study will be made available to you.

**Confidentiality:** Participant's information will be kept private and confidential. The data will be collected and is limited to recorded text only. Your information will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in a locked file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

**Voluntary participation:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

IRB-SBS Office Use Only	
Protocol #	
Approved SBS Staff	from: _____ to: _____

**Right to withdraw from the study:** You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

**How to withdraw from the study:** To withdraw from the study, or if you have any questions, simply notify Stephen Zadravec at [stephen.zadravec@snhu.edu](mailto:stephen.zadravec@snhu.edu) or call the office at (603) 610-4169.

If you have questions about your rights in the study, contact:

Dr. Margaret Ford, Associate Dean, School of Education  
 Southern New Hampshire University  
 2500 North River Rd.  
 Manchester, NH 03106  
 Phone (603) 668-2211 ext. 2277

Agreement:

I agree to participate in this study (please check one): YES\_\_\_\_ NO\_\_\_\_

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

IRB-SBS Office Use Only	
Protocol #	_____
Approved SBS Staff	from: _____ to: _____



## Appendix C

### Permission from Supervisor

Project Title: Enabling Factors for School Success in Schools Improving from Good to Great

Dear Superintendent,

I am a student in the Southern New Hampshire University Educational Leadership Doctoral program conducting a research study under the direction of Dr. Mark McQuillan. I am interested in studying a case of a school that has shown continuous improvement in student outcomes. A school in your district has been selected by virtue of its status as a designated Reward School.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to investigate effective models of leadership and other contributing factors to school success in continuously raising student achievement.

Your principal and staff members will be asked a series of questions about their perceptions of the contributing factors for their school's success, their beliefs about valid indicators of school success, and their evidence for success in their school. The results will be summarized to inform the conversation on continuous improvement in high performing schools. There is no risk to you/your staff or participants.

We are writing to request your permission to proceed with this study. Please respond at your earliest convenience with your permission to contact individuals or questions you may have to Stephen Zadravec at [stephen.zadravec@snhu.edu](mailto:stephen.zadravec@snhu.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact:

Dr. Margaret Ford, Associate Dean, School of Education  
Southern New Hampshire University  
2500 North River Rd.  
Manchester, NH 03106  
Phone (603) 668-2211ext. 2277

Sincerely,

Stephen Zadravec

## Appendix D

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Date of Interview** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of Participant** \_\_\_\_\_

**Organization** \_\_\_\_\_

**Department** \_\_\_\_\_ **Year** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewed by** \_\_\_\_\_

I am interviewing a number of teachers and administrators in schools identified as high achieving and improving by virtue of their status as a designated Reward School by the New Hampshire Department of Education. My interest is in exploring the factors perceived to contribute most to the school's success and particularly the leadership necessary to support continuous improvement. I am interested in learning from your experience.

The information you provide in this interview will be used in the research I am conducting at Southern New Hampshire University. The collected comments, experience and suggestions from all of the participants interviewed will be reviewed and saved by the supervising faculty member.

The interview questions used will reflect a deep exploration of the following overarching research questions:

1. How do the perceived enabling factors for school improvement by teachers and administrators in identified Reward Schools compare with Collins' good-to-great framework?
2. How do the indicators of success that are most valued by teachers and administrators in these schools compare with the indicators that define their identified status as great (i.e., a Reward School)?
3. How do the characteristics of the leadership in schools that have been designated as *Reward Schools* compare with Collins' construct of Level 5 Leadership?

The above research questions will be informed by a semi-structured interview using the following interview question as a guide:

What is your experience and background, including how you came to work at this school?

How would you describe the mission and vision for this school? How have those been developed and how are they communicated to others? (Hedgehog Concept)

Your school has been recognized for impressive continuous growth in student learning. When and how did these improvements begin? (Flywheel/Hedgehog Concept)

How have these improvements been sustained? (Flywheel/Hedgehog Concept)

Take a minute and write down the top five factors you believe have contributed to the school's success in raising student achievement. (Flywheel/Hedgehog Concept)

What factors have been most important as "high leverage" strategies for increased student learning? Please number them in order of importance with 1 being the most important factor. (Flywheel/Hedgehog Concept)

Give me some examples that illustrate the factors you cited as most important. (Flywheel/Hedgehog Concept)

What specifically have those in school leadership positions done to enable this growth? (Level 5 Leadership)

How would you describe the leadership style of the principal? (Level 5 Leadership)

How would you describe the personal qualities of those in school leadership positions that are most relevant to the school's success? (Level 5 Leadership)

What *process* is used in the school to make decisions about key factors in improving student learning? Who is involved and what is considered? (Level 5 Leadership)

Tell me about the makeup of the school staff over the last 3-5 years. Have there been significant changes? (First who, then what)

How are teachers hired and then supported when they come to the school? (First who, then what)

What is considered important in candidates when hiring teachers and who is involved? (First who, then what)

How is professional development structured at your school? What are the areas of focus for professional growth? (First who, then what)

How is teacher time and student time scheduled at your school? What purpose does that schedule serve in achieving continuous improvement? (Level 5 Leadership)

How else is highly effective teaching supported at your school? (First who, then what)

How is data used in addressing challenges and monitoring progress? (Confront the brutal facts)

How did your school address the pressures of state and federal accountability while making these improvements? (Confront the brutal facts)

How well are the values of external assessments, such as the NECAP, aligned with what the school values most in student learning? In what ways, if any, are they not aligned? (Research Question #2)

Many schools create plans for improvement and undertake initiatives to improve student learning. While these may lead to short term gains for many, few schools sustain these improvements over time. Reward Schools are identified for their success in doing just that. What makes these schools different? (Flywheel)

Give me one clear vignette from your experience here that exemplifies the essence of the success at your school. (Research Question #2)

## Appendix E

### STAFF SURVEY

The purpose of this survey is to gather staff perceptions on what factors enable a school to sustain growth in student learning. This survey is a component of a doctoral research project at Southern New Hampshire University. This study aims to explore schools identified as high achieving and improving by virtue of their status as a designated Reward School by the New Hampshire Department of Education. Specifically, the study will examine the factors perceived to contribute most to the school's success and the leadership necessary to support continuous improvement. Your perspective will be extremely valuable to the study.

Please take a few moments to answer the questions below. All responses will be reported in an aggregate form and no identifiable information will be used in the study results. If you have any questions about this survey, or the research project in general, please don't hesitate to contact Steve Zdravec at [stephen.zdravec@snhu.edu](mailto:stephen.zdravec@snhu.edu).

How long have you been working in education?

How long have you been working at this school?

How would you describe the mission and vision for this school? How have those been developed and how are they communicated to others?

Your school has been recognized for impressive continuous growth in student learning. When and how did these improvements begin?

How have these improvements been sustained?

Take a minute and write down the top five factors you believe have contributed to the school's success in raising student achievement.

What factors have been most important as "high leverage" strategies for increased student learning? Please number them in order of importance with 1 being the most important factor.

Give me some examples that illustrate the factors you cited as most important.

What specifically have those in school leadership positions done to enable this growth?

How would you describe the leadership style of the principal?

How would you describe the personal qualities of those in school leadership positions that are most relevant to the school's success?

What *process* is used in the school to make decisions about key factors in improving student learning? Who is involved and what is considered?

How are teachers hired and then supported when they come to the school?

What is considered important in candidates when hiring teachers and who is involved?

How is professional development structured at your school? What are the areas of focus for professional growth?

How else is highly effective teaching supported at your school?

How is data used in addressing challenges and monitoring progress?

How well are the values of external assessments, such as the NECAP, aligned with what the school values most in student learning? In what ways, if any, are they not aligned?

Many schools create plans for improvement and undertake initiatives to improve student learning. While these may lead to short term gains for many, few schools sustain these improvements over time. Reward Schools are identified for their success in doing just that. What makes these schools different?

## Appendix F

### REWARD SCHOOL METHODOLOGY

In this procedure “all schools” refers to schools designated as Title I schools

#### Step 1:

Rank order all elementary and middle schools based on the combined average of % proficient (and above) in math and reading for the last three years, and divide into quartiles.

Rank order all high schools based on the combined average of % proficient (and above) in math and reading for the last three years, and divide into quartiles.

#### Step 2:

Calculate 3-year composite Median Student Growth Percentile\*\* for all elementary and middle schools.

For all high schools, calculate differential (delta) of combined index (math and reading) scores between the early average (in this case years 2009-10 and 2010-11) and late (in this case years 2011-12 and 2012-13) average scores – using the most recent 4-year combined index.

#### Step 3:

Elementary and Middle Schools, select schools with Composite MGP of 60 or greater from each performance quartile. These are the Elementary/Middle School Reward Schools.

High Schools, select schools from each performance quartile where the delta between the early average combined (math and reading) index scores is 10 or greater AND where the late average is 160 or greater. These are the High School Reward Schools.

\*\* The New Hampshire Growth Model measures student growth by taking account of where a student starts and uses NECAP results for all NH students in a given content area and grade to quantify each student’s annual progress. The resulting measure is called a student growth percentile. Similar to height and weight percentiles used to describe the relative height and weight of an infant compared to other infants of the same sex and age (e.g., a child’s weight is in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile as compared to all other male, or female, children), a student growth percentile describes the relative growth a student made compared to other students with the same achievement history as their academic peers. Academic peers are not an actual set of students but are constructed using all the state’s data. Simply put it’s a model that evaluates the change in a student’s achievement over at least two points in time compared to the student’s “academic peers,” (i.e., students with the same prior score history). The results are reported as a student growth percentile that describes the student’s growth relative to his/her academic peers. Individual student results can be aggregated to any unit desired such as subgroup, classrooms, schools, and districts. (NH DOE, 2012)