



***My Voice* at the Captain Albert Stevens School:
A Case Study**

Presented by the Pearson Foundation





Introduction

This is one in a series of case studies presented by the Pearson Foundation to examine results achieved by schools using [the My Voice Staff Survey](#) developed by the [Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations](#).

During the 2004–05 academic year, the *My Voice* Staff Survey was administered at Captain Albert Stevens School (CASS). After merging three schools and staff to create Captain Albert Stevens School, the principal looked to *My Voice* to help create a unified culture. After reviewing the survey results, school staff introduced new ideas and practices, while others were aimed at improving current practices. Only one year after implementing the program, in the 2005–06 academic year, the *My Voice* Survey was re-administered at Captain Albert Stevens School. Results of this second survey indicated improvement in key areas that foster staff belonging and positive perceptions of school culture.

A detailed explanation of changes made in response to the initial *My Voice* Survey results at Captain Albert Stevens School is provided below. More information about the *My Voice* Survey is available online at myvoice.pearsonfoundation.org.

About the Captain Albert Stevens School

Similar to many coastal communities in northern New England, Belfast, Maine, the hometown of Captain Albert Stevens School, has the joint identity of a fishing community and a tourist community, both of which have been affected by economic downturns. Captain Albert Stevens School serves an economically diverse population of approximately 300 students, with 50% qualifying for free and reduced lunch benefits. Due to a fluctuating population and the financial challenges of keeping small schools open, the town consolidated three elementary schools to create Captain Albert Stevens School. Merging staff and students from three different schools posed a series of challenges, as each school had its own mission, culture, and ideas about teaching and learning. To unify staff and students, the principal of this consolidated learning community introduced the *My Voice* Survey and the Aspirations framework as a means to bridge their differences. The Aspirations framework incorporates the [Three Guiding Principles](#) and [8 Conditions](#) that should be in place for students to reach their fullest potential.



About CASS (continued)

The primary focus of Captain Albert Stevens School, as noted by its principal, was to make the Aspirations framework “the way we do things around here.” This initiative included incorporating the **Three Guiding Principles** into the school’s mission statement, student handbook, parent evenings, interview process, professional learning, and teacher goal-setting. To begin this arduous process, the principal established an Aspirations Leadership Team responsible for developing an in-depth understanding of Aspirations and working with the staff to incorporate support for aspirations in their school.

My Voice at CASS

Acknowledging the unique situation of consolidating staff members from multiple schools into a single cohesive group, one of the first steps taken was to administer the *My Voice* Staff Survey. The results of this survey were used as a starting point for building a new culture and identity (results shown from 2004-2005 school year).

- 50% of staff felt valued for their unique skills and talents
- 39% of staff said they felt confident voicing their honest opinions and concerns
- 29% of staff felt comfortable eating in the teachers’ room

The Aspirations Leadership Team moved forward with several initiatives. Some introduced new ideas and practices, while others were aimed at improving current practices.

Areas for Improvement

They identified one area in particular – communication – as requiring a significant focus. This is a typical challenge for any school, and even more so for a new school. In order for the staff to work together, it was important for each person to feel comfortable and respected sharing his or her ideas. Every staff member needed to know that his or her opinion mattered.



Areas for Improvement (continued)

An initial step taken was to address this concern by involving all staff in activities that would allow them to get to know one another and create a sense of belonging and trust. This was an essential foundation for open and honest communication moving forward. Grade-level teams were also established so that staff at each level had time to address issues important to them – sharing what was successful, as well as areas that needed improvement. To facilitate communication among the entire staff, including across grade levels, staff began to use WikiNotes. Monthly school-wide assemblies were started as a means to provide each grade level the opportunity to share student work depicting best teaching and learning practices.

With a specific focus on supporting new teachers, a system was designed where each month new teachers had an opportunity to meet with a different staff member just to talk and learn about the details of upcoming school events. This mentoring program allowed new staff members to quickly develop supportive relationships with veteran teachers.

In addition to efforts lead by the Aspirations Team, the principal took the initiative to lead by example. She held open office hours twice a week so that the staff could drop in to discuss any issue. Staff meetings were restructured to focus more on the students and learning than about the routine operations of the school, and one meeting each month was dedicated to implementing ideas related to Aspirations. The principal found that alternate methods of communication, such as email, could effectively address the day-to-day school operations, but the staff needed time together to communicate openly and develop a sense of trust and unity in their goals.

A concerted effort was also made at Captain Albert Stevens School to ensure that staff felt valued for the knowledge and skills they possessed. To capitalize on the strengths of her staff members, the principal redesigned staff development sessions so that they were teacher directed. The development of these professional learning communities served a dual purpose: strengthening the knowledge and skills of all staff by sharing successful teaching practices, and honoring the unique skills and talents of the dedicated individuals in the school. Staff were also afforded time to observe colleagues and provide constructive feedback. Among other public acknowledgements of the great work by staff, a display was designed to highlight their efforts and accomplishments. Staff were also encouraged to share their knowledge beyond the school walls and make presentations at statewide conferences.



Areas for Improvement (continued)

With communication identified as an essential focus for this newly formed learning community, the staff was committed to involving students in the process. The Aspirations Team conducted focus group interviews with students in kindergarten through fifth grade in order to gain an understanding of their needs and desires for the learning community. Based on the responses, the school developed several student leadership initiatives, including biweekly leadership classes for all students. During these mixed-age leadership sessions, student activities ranged from physical clean-up around the building to developing an anti-bullying play. These activities resulted in increased input and genuine decision-making opportunities for students.

Parent involvement and understanding was viewed as an essential component of implementing the Aspirations framework and supporting students and staff at school. To this end, Captain Albert Stevens School held student Aspirations fairs where students and parents were invited to experience the **8 Conditions that Make a Difference**[®]. Families rotated through stations that involved activities such as writing postcards to Heroes, experiencing Spirit of Adventure through an obstacle course, and exploring Curiosity & Creativity by planting mystery seeds and wondering what would grow in six weeks. Another way the school involved parents and community members was through the development of a community mentoring program. For seven years, Captain Albert Stevens School has trained community members to be Aspiration mentors to students. The program has allowed more than 200 students to work with mentors!

Results of the CASS 2006–07 Survey

To assess the school's progress, the principal used multiple data sources, including the *My Voice* Staff Survey. The following results reveal a positive change in the staff's perceptions of the school culture:

- 63% of staff felt valued for their unique skills and talents (13% increase)
- 45% of staff said they felt confident voicing their honest opinions and concerns (6% increase)
- 66% of staff felt comfortable eating lunch in the teachers' room (37% increase)



In conjunction with the Aspirations framework, the staff at CASS also incorporated the **8 Conditions** into the school's vision statement.

Our vision at Captain Albert Stevens School is supporting and promoting 8 Aspirations Conditions, which are: Belonging, Sense of Accomplishment, Heroes, Fun & Excitement, Spirit of Adventure, Curiosity & Creativity, Confidence to Take Action, and Leadership & Responsibility. These conditions, we believe, keep us focused on educating each child in a holistic manner. When children are consistently surrounded by and taught about the importance of education and the love of learning, responsibility, and their healthy well-being, they develop habits that ensure success and obtaining their dreams.

In Closing

CASS continued to use techniques developed in response to the *My Voice* Staff Survey, and school staff provided Aspirations in-service training in order to become familiar with the Aspirations framework and goals. Yearly teacher goal-setting included at least one Aspirations-related goal. To ensure that all staff had an opportunity to have their voice heard in the process, the Aspirations Team rotated new members onto the team each year.