Citizens for Excellence in Maine’s Elementary Schools (CEMES) was founded in January 2003 as a not-for-profit organization to facilitate the development and sharing of information about Maine’s most successful elementary schools. The underlying premise of CEMES is that improvement in every school can be helped by shining the spotlight on the most successful schools to identify “what works.”

The first CEMES project dealt with Maine’s top-performing schools in the early grades on the theory that these grades are the most important in every child’s education. Since the fourth grade is the earliest for which statewide assessment is available, we surveyed the principals of Maine’s top schools in terms of percentage of fourth graders meeting or exceeding Maine’s Learning Results (MLR) standards on all seven subjects covered by the 2001–2002 Maine Educational Assessment (MEA). The seven subjects tested in Maine are reading, writing, math, science/technology, social studies, visual/performing arts, and health.

Our study had three parts. First, a brief questionnaire was sent to Maine’s top fourth-grade schools as defined above, with 14 questionnaires (45%) returned and evaluated. Second, the University of Maine Center for Early Literacy was contacted to determine which Maine schools used Reading Recovery in 2001–2002. Third, each of the schools completing questionnaires was visited for face-to-face discussion with principals and observation of class activities. Key findings of the survey are as follows:

- Only 33 of Maine’s 376 elementary schools with fourth grades exceeded the statewide average in meeting or exceeding Maine’s Learning Results (MLR) standards on all seven subjects covered by the 2001–2002 Maine Educational Assessment (MEA). The seven subjects tested in Maine are reading, writing, math, science/technology, social studies, visual/performing arts, and health.
- Though the most common elementary school configuration in Maine is K–8, only five of the top fourth-grade schools had seventh and eighth grades. Said differently, over 85% of the top schools in fourth-grade achievement had less than seven grades. This may suggest that schools with fewer grades enable administrative focus which is a big help in achieving early-grade excellence.
- Among our other observations, the single most striking finding of the survey was the near universality of Reading Recovery usage in the top schools with first grades. Thirteen of the fourteen schools completing questionnaires had first grades and 12 of these used Reading Recovery.

A check of records at the University of Maine Center for Early Literacy, overseer of the Reading Recovery program throughout Maine, revealed that over three-quarters (77%) of the state’s top fourth-grade MEA schools with first grades used the program, while only just over half (52%) of all Maine schools with first grades used Reading Recovery. Further, observations during our school visits and conversations with school administrators bore testament to the efficacy and efficiency of Reading Recovery in getting virtually all children over the hurdle of early reading difficulties.

1 Reading Recovery is a first-grade intervention in the United States so only schools with first grades can be considered in developing statistics on Reading Recovery usage.
with two or more grades—both practices providing greater continuity of teachers with students beyond a single year. Another widespread practice was team teaching. Strong parental involvement was also frequently cited as an important element in school success.

- All principals, one way or another, gave credit to staff for school success. The importance of leadership by principals was also evident during our on-site visits. High expectations for teachers and students alike proved to be a common thread connecting these schools.

- Just as there were several elements of commonality in these schools, so were there several elements of uniqueness. For example, a school with 63% of its students eligible for free- and reduced-price meals did not have any teachers with master’s degrees. The principal of this school taught fourth graders taking the 2001–2002 MEA in third grade as well using an old-fashioned syllabus and syllabus workbooks in both grades. This school was one of the tops in the state on the reading portion of the MEA.

Another unique school was an open plan school with grades clustered in pods. In this school, three fourth-grade teachers, teaching as a team, handled over 75 pupils in a space not separated by walls. These fourth graders had the highest score in the state on the writing portion of the MEA.

Other elements of uniqueness were schools with literacy specialists and schools with laptop computer carts that could be wheeled into early-grade classrooms.

That the CEMES survey unearthed a number of factors associated with the success of Maine’s top schools in the early grades is not surprising. Elements of excellence in education have always been numerous, multifaceted, and resistant to objective measurement.

The identification of Reading Recovery—a proven method for getting virtually all children over the hurdle of early reading difficulties—as the single most common programmatic feature found in Maine’s top fourth-grade schools is therefore certainly worthy of notice. An important additional aspect of Reading Recovery is the impetus it provides to stimulation of ongoing professional development.

As stated on page 18 of the Maine Department of Education’s 2-year study of early literacy programs in Maine’s schools, A Solid Foundation:

The schools in the conference sample referred to Reading Recovery as a ‘catalyst’ for helping them discover strategies— and improvement of their understanding about—teaching all children to read. They believed that it had given them practical help in reflecting on their literacy programs and that it ‘opened up a drive for better practice.’

For administrators and school boards looking for ways to improve performance of their schools in the early grades, our study strongly suggests that Reading Recovery should be a part of their thinking.

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### Numbers in Brief From This Study

- **376 Number of Maine elementary schools with fourth grades**
- **33 Number of fourth-grade schools scoring above the state average on all seven subjects measured by the 2001–2002 Maine Educational Assessment (MEA) test. These are referred to as “top schools” in the study.**
- **12 Number of top schools using Reading Recovery out of the 13 top schools with first grades returning questionnaires**
- **52% Percentage of Maine’s schools with first grades using Reading Recovery (211 of Maine’s 402 schools with first grades used Reading Recovery in 2001–2002 according to the University of Maine’s Center for Early Literacy.)**
- **77% Percentage of top fourth-grade Maine schools with first grades using Reading Recovery in 2001–2002 according to the University of Maine’s Center for Early Literacy (20 of 26 schools).**