Best Practices Case Study[i]

Carol Forman-Pemberton, *Spring 2007*

Holland Middle School
Holland Central School District

Holland is a rural community just south of Buffalo set among a number of similar communities. It considers its proximity to the big city as both positive and negative -- giving it access to business and educational opportunities yet making it compete financially with neighboring communities that have wealthier tax bases.

The sense of community is strong in Holland, and the school district both supports and depends on this sense of community to maintain its high academic success. While there is not an excess of money, the superintendent talks about community support for the schools. A few years ago, when a librarian position was in jeopardy, the community responded by asking the board to put the $100,000 back in the budget, despite the increased tax liability.

The schools are the center of the community. The grounds and buildings are in such constant use that it sometimes causes maintenance issues. The superintendent reports that the board has asked him for a full athletic plan so it can continue to make a place for all students to participate at their level of need.

Holland has an active Boys and Girls Club situated on the main street. A bus runs from the schools to the Club for after-school activities and supervised care. When the Club needed some repairs, students in the middle school organized a dance whose proceeds went to the Club.

The principal says that he would not be able to run the very successful after-school homework program if it were not for parent support. He also talks about the parental support necessary—and forthcoming—for the music program. Because students cannot bring musical instruments on the buses, parents must bring students to school on the days of lessons and band or orchestra rehearsals.

Many teachers mention that continuing efforts are required to encourage all parents to support the school's academic goals, especially the goal of preparing for higher education. Many communication lines between parents and the school were evident and in use. While the demographics suggest a high level of homogeneousness, a lot of effort is put into seeing each child as an individual and focusing on character building as the basis for success.

> We don't have control over what comes in as far as the kids. We have some children who learn differently from other children. We have to squeeze in so many requirements within a certain time frame; that is a challenge. We deal with those who are behind socially and struggle with those that are academically behind. The problem exists socially, but we deal with the students pretty well.

Student Demographics 2005-2006: *Holland Middle School, Holland Central School District[iii]*

	Holland MS	Holland Central SD	New York State
% Eligible for Free Lunch	13%	13%	37%
% Eligible for Reduced Lunch	9%	7%	8%
% Limited English Proficient	0%	0%	N/A
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution 　% African-American 　% Hispanic/Latino 　% White 　% Other	 0% 0% 100% 0%	 0% 0% 99% 0%	 20% 20% 53% 7%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 ELA Test	56%	55%	49%
% Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards on Gr. 8 Math Test	79%	78%	54%
K-12, Total Enrollment	387	1211	2,772,669

Community, Context, Climate and Culture

When interviewing potential teachers or administrators, the superintendent asks a key question that he says is the deal breaker for him. He always asks how the candidate would handle the case of the truly recalcitrant student or class—the one that no matter what was tried or how many approaches have been taken, refuses to cooperate or even try to succeed. The bottom line for this superintendent is that one never gives up on a student.

Best Practices

The attitude that one never gives up on a student was evident throughout Holland Middle School, with its focus on personally attending to the whole student, emphasizing respect and responsibility, and instilling trust through communication. These characteristics reflect "best practices" that cut across the five dimensions that frame the larger study of which this case is one part. After a brief description of some of these highlights, the sections that follow expand on them within the context of the five dimensions.

Focus on Students

One of the principal's priorities for the school is its commitment to students: "I want it a priority that teachers really care about their students—and that they demonstrate that." It is the demonstration of the attention to students that is so clear in Holland. It starts with the modeling the principal does himself.

During our school visit, he greeted each student we passed by name and addressed a personal question or comment—"What did you think of the call in the game last night?" "How many feet on your pedometer today?" "You did a nice job on the fish tank." He clearly values time spent directly with his students:

> *I was having a problem with early drop off with no supervision my first year here. The kids were going to the cafeteria and I would be there babysitting. When I took kids from the cafeteria to gym, I went from 50 to 100 kids because the kids wanted to go to the gym with me. Now, the kids know that is my time with the kids. We shoot baskets and play 4*

square. I will even go in during gym class to play something with them. I am also there with them during activity period.

Importance of Character and Success

Holland Middle School has two rules—respect and responsibility. The rules are posted in the office, in classrooms, and in other places around the building. Teachers refer to these rules, and they form the basis for decision making about program and policy. Students hear about them on the first day of school and every day after that.

A teacher describes success at Holland:

If I am giving 100%, I am giving my best and the students are reciprocating. … They are 'hanging' in every class. At the beginning of the year, [the principal] calls all kids together to learn the rules. Kids think before they act.

A second teacher echoes the belief.

[We] define [success] many ways, not just academic. Respect and responsibility are a huge part of how the school runs. A successful student is not necessarily an A student, but one who is respectful and responsible. People want to do well. This focus creates a culture of success because it goes back to the two ideals.

Another puts it like this:

A student recently wrote us a letter after the Virginia Tech shootings about how important it is to understand tolerance. Our focus here has been discussions of cliques, bullying, the Holocaust. … We—[another] teacher and I— spend a great deal of time on this. The first year, we had a student who first wrote an amazing anonymous letter about why tolerance is so important—and then later openly claimed authorship. We sent the letter to the high school to be published. To learn to motivate kids like this….It was so motivating for us as teachers. It was fantastic.

Communication and Trust

The principal talks about trust as the single most important quality he has tried to build with his faculty and about the crucial role that communication plays in building that trust. The door to his office is always open. He is available to any teacher or student most of the time. He has worked purposefully to establish open communication and personal connection with everyone on his staff. Another important part of the trust and communication is his use and modeling of positive energy. He talks about how building trust and energy takes time. Together, this trust and energy now motivate teachers, even those who had been out the door at dismissal time for years. Now, they even join in the fun at the annual Field Day.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

In Holland goals are set based on what is best for the whole student. There is little question that academic success is important to everyone in the district. That academic success, however, is based on the two priorities of respect and responsibility, and those two qualities are always emphasized.

In all of the teacher interviews, it was apparent that goal setting and curriculum development at Holland Middle School are determined by incorporating the New York State Curriculum Standards, joining and sharing the results of ongoing professional learning communities, and including concepts from research and best practice.

Learning Communities
In the middle school, the idea that teachers need to be working in learning communities is so ingrained in the culture, so assumed to be a natural part of the fabric of the school, that no one even brings it up. Instead, comments focus on how the learning communities are effective. Each core teacher is assigned to a full block of "professional development" every other day to work on curriculum, assessment, and student needs with team members. Curricular goals are set and developed with a constant eye on what students are doing and how to best integrate curriculum strands so that students are inspired to work to their fullest capacities.

The practice of interdisciplinary teams meeting daily and actively to focus on student learning and achievement and to work on curriculum and academic goals—as opposed to leaving curriculum solely in the hands of each department or discipline—has produced engaging, effective curriculum. While each core teacher has a close eye on state curriculum standards, it is the interdisciplinary team work that seems to inspire the specific content and delivery.

As an example of the effect of this team collaboration, a teacher describes a complicated, three-month stock market project she taught with her team:

> *The Middle School defines success not just by academic achievement but kids being successful in life. ... The stock market I always did with the math teacher. We went to a web site for the game. We ran it from November through February this year. At different times, we did other things. I did current events, even during the stock market project, and that is one that I see as best practice. I would give them a topic each time, and sometimes I would ask them to find a current event associated with their company in the project. The math teacher assigned circle and line graphs. She had a math packet that covered the buying and selling. I had the vocabulary and did writing spanning the year to see growth. The collaboration with the math teacher had us addressing all the standards with the projects. The kids took ownership. The culminating task was difficult; we really problem solved this time to make the project like real life.*
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> *The principal had shown us a video at the beginning of the year about making instruction more real life. In the past we assigned an essay on how [their companies] did. It was too difficult. The superintendent had us watch a tape about making assessments more realistic. So we settled on typed interview questions, a four-slide Power Point (we had a smart board mounted so all the kids could see), and they had to do an oral with a team of three teacher interviewers. We got a lot of support from people during the presentation time. Kids were amazing; they dressed up and everything. They really went outside of the box to do this project. We thought a lot about the scope of it before we took it on. They had to look up corporate citizenship as a part of the research. They learned a lot about the companies that they buy from.*
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> *When it came to grading, we had to be a little creative. ... W e picked the top five interviews and looked at what made them so successful. It worked out well because the English teacher was doing* Charley *at the same time we were talking about emotional intelligence.*

Curriculum Mapping

The superintendent relates how the articulated curriculum has improved under his leadership and describes his methods of involving teachers in this project. Rather than mandating a single discipline approach to curriculum development, he capitalized on the professional learning communities that were already in place and functioning well together. Because their focus on student learning was, and is, the source of critical energy, he let that focus serve as the background for the commitment of units and plans to the curriculum maps.

> *[A well known researcher] suggests there are three questions: What do the kids need to know? How do we know that they know those things? What are we going to do when the kids do not know?*
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> *The teachers need to know the answers to these questions. …We are in the early stages of transferring paper to software and it takes time. I originally thought we could have our secretaries type things in, but there were too many educational decisions to be made at the point of input. We have dedicated a lot of time — summer work plus the superintendent's conference time — to getting these done. In addition, there is also the expectation the teacher groups will present their curriculum maps at board meetings to show where we are and why. The group presentations are sometimes made by representatives of a larger group, like a department. Sometimes the groupings are by grade level and subject area. Having these flexible groupings and alternatives allows the teachers to explore areas they otherwise might not.*

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Because Holland is so close to Buffalo and its affluent suburbs, the district sometimes struggles with the financial competition in its attempts to attract teachers and administrators. But money is not the factor that keeps people in Holland. One teacher says he stays because he can teach here and does not face the struggles with middle school issues that friends who teach in other districts face. Most of the teachers say they stay because "the kids are wonderful." One teacher says he has stayed more than twenty-five years because he has never "dreaded coming to school."

> *It all comes back to a sense of community. Middle school is a nice, open working environment. There are not a lot of discipline issues. We have great administrative support, and we have a very nice clientele. The kids here are amazing. Since I have been here, I looked at other districts. I could make a lot more money in another district, but the money advantage does not outweigh the advantages of the kids or the administration. Here, we have the freedom to teach. I know I am not here just to prepare kids for tests.*

How does this all come together? The superintendent says he hires well. "I look for people who are knowledgeable. I look for heart—caregivers that are smart. People will trust them and know the person cares about them. I look for people who will never give up on kids."

He also has a memory for good qualities in potential candidates. He tells the story of interviewing the current elementary principal for a teaching position in another district a number of years ago. At the time, he saw focus, determination, and "heart" in her. Later, when he needed to hire an elementary principal at Holland, her name came up on a headhunter's list. His recruitment call to her ended up with her being hired by the district.

The middle school principal, who was already in place when the superintendent arrived, is recognized as having a great deal of further leadership potential says the superintendent. The principal may be an outstanding candidate for a superintendent in the future, but it would be better to wait for now because "he is having so much fun" at the middle school. The superintendent adds that it is important to consider timing in one's career; a superintendent's job is one of balancing all of the stakeholders' needs in order to benefit and optimize student success. And, while rewarding and challenging, it can be very stressful.

Developing Shared Leadership
As seen in the superintendent's mentoring of the principal, capacity building in Holland seems to be characterized by creating a respectful and supportive climate for professional growth, developing opportunities for people at all levels to try new leadership roles, and understanding that leadership does not come with a title but with taking on the responsibility of the job. Evidence of these assumptions and practices in the district:

- The principal encouraged a middle school teacher to apply for and implement a grant that took her to a college campus for several weeks in the summer and that required both reflective and innovative classroom practice.
- Grade-level teams rotate the chair position every eight weeks to give every person a chance to be the 'go-to' person for the group. The principal is pleased that such transitions are so seamless that he only knows about the leadership shift when he gets a message to report to a different room for team meetings.
- A small group of eighth graders took on a fund-raising task for the Boys and Girls Club and put significant effort into organizing the event, gathering prizes and donations, and getting faculty and administrative support for the final assembly in the school auditorium.

Mentoring
Mentoring is a large part of the capacity building in Holland. Many of the teachers speak about the mentoring program in glowing terms. Some even say they are sorry they were hired too early to participate. The program was put together primarily by a team of teachers. One mentor is hired for each building each year to work with new teachers. Mentors meet with new teachers frequently, at least weekly, and they meet as a cohort with the mentor team once a month. They have a "textbook" of readings, a notebook, and a requirement that the new teachers develop a professional portfolio. One teacher describes it as "almost a graduate class" in scope and depth. New teachers also work frequently with the principal.

Professional Development
When asked about professional development opportunities, teachers talk about some opportunities for conference attendance that are limited by funding, tech support, and the subjects of superintendent's conference day presentations, which are generally positive. Descriptions of the professional growth opportunities that come from their collaborative team time are very energy charged. On the printed school schedule, team time is called "professional development" time, and teachers describe it like this: "Our teams are so small that they are always together and always talking. A big part of professional development comes from common planning time and common team time."

Drawbacks to leadership and capacity building seem to be money and an "antiquated" professional assessment program that is being updated and improved. Both administrators

interviewed and most of the teachers mention the low salaries of the teachers as a detriment to both hiring and retention.

The principal also describes the professional assessment program as under review, revision, and improvement: "We have a PPR [Professional Performance Review] that I go over with each person. That is usually a project they work on from September to June. Non-tenured teachers get observed twice a year. And that's it, which is crazy. We are working on a new professional performance review that would include tenured teachers being observed."

Instructional Program, Practices, and Arrangements

Homework Incentive Program

Students do their homework— lots of it. Among the plentiful evidence that they do is a series of plaques in the lobby of the Middle School. It's an extensive list of the names of students who did all their homework in all classes for the whole year.

The principal focuses on getting students involved in their work and their homework in a multi-pronged program that focuses on carrots rather than sticks. One part is the Homework Incentive Program. Every five weeks, teachers list all the students who have done all the homework for that time period. Students who have completed all the assignments get a certificate and a party to celebrate the accomplishment. Every five weeks, all students get a 'clean slate' and a fresh chance to earn the homework award for the next five weeks. If they do all the homework for the year, the principal takes them to a professional baseball game in Buffalo. The first year of the program, he took 27 students; the second year, about 75; last year he took 132—and he is a little concerned about funding what looks to be an even larger number this year. He is very proud that more than a third of the students are completing 100% of their assignments.

After-School Academic Program

Several years ago, the principal asked the middle school teachers about students' accountability for their work and their own success. When students' need for homework help came up, he instituted ASAP (After School Academic Program) which he runs himself with the help of the guidance counselor, who takes one of the three-times-per-week sections. Students who are falling behind in their homework are scheduled for this after-school program. Teachers describe it as a quiet, structured place for students to do their homework and to get some help if they need it. Teachers stop in to work with students individually, answer questions, or deliver materials. Several teachers mention that this is effective tutoring time because they are not responsible for the whole group. The program does not require an extra bus run because students are bused to the elementary school that runs buses at a later time. The program also runs with no extra cost to the district because the principal chooses to use his own time for the program.

A middle school teacher who had been a student at the school describes the new homework incentive program as one notable change that has promoted student success:

> One newer program—ASAP – [was] . . . set up for kids who were not doing homework. . .
> Once kids are in ASAP, they can work their way out. Parents can nominate kids.
> Teachers stop down to answer questions or to bring work. Sometimes there are National
> Honor Society students to help out. The kids stay until the teacher says [enough progress

has been made]—a week, a month, indefinitely. Usually, a student stays until the next progress reports.

Activity Period
When asked what successful changes he has made, the principal offers an unusual answer:

One thing that is pretty radical … we have recess. Recess is a block of time in schedule—16 minutes— where students can go outside. It is physical. It cannot be taken away as a discipline. It is an opportunity for students to burn off a little steam. When we first started, it was everyone in the school at once. Now we have broken it up for two sessions. The time is after lunch. The gym is available for one grade level. The Student Government purchased board games, pedometers. Some of the teachers do walking with kids in the halls. It is part of an awareness of healthy choices. All the teachers participate. I will be in there shooting baskets with kids. This is one change that has had the most positive impact. In the first year it was instituted, we had a 50% decrease in detentions. How do I explain that drop? If a kid is going to be seated for 7 hours a day in class, and if we provide them an outlet for dealing with it, they will focus better in class. Kids need to move. If you don't let them, they will create their own outlet.

Character Education
Character education plays a strong role in the program. Each week a character education theme is announced and becomes part of the daily class discussion. Each day a quote from a notable source that revolves around the theme is announced. There is a push to "catch" students demonstrating good character, especially the focus trait. Teachers and parents can nominate students. Winners of the character education awards each month receive certificates and get their pictures taken for display.

Technology Use
The use of technology plays an important part in program development and assessment. Many teachers mention a recent technology initiative as a positive step forward. One teacher talks about how he uses his new smart board almost every day. Other teachers talk about how students are required to prepare Power Point presentations as part of a long-term project assessment. The district has a teacher on special assignment as a tech liaison, who can provide ten minute turn around times for tech support at the high school. The tech person has to travel from the high school to the middle school, which is not on the same campus. But even so, tech support at the middle school usually takes less than an hour.

Strive for Five
The middle school also has adopted a "Strive for 5" objective: 5% increase in the number of students scoring 3s and 4s on state assessments, 5% increase in the number of students on the honor roll, 5% increase in homework awards, and a 5% decrease in discipline referrals. Each teacher is expected to participate in these goals in whatever ways s/he can, and the goals remain consistent from year to year. One teacher says that they have had so much success in the past few years that meeting the goal every year presents a challenge, and it remains a "goal without a goal line."

Fitness Program
In response to the call for more attention to national fitness, Holland Middle School started a "Fit and Fun" program. It began with fitness prizes for fourth and fifth graders and has expanded this year to combine "Fit and Fun" with community service. The principal describes the initiative:

Nine kids did the whole thing—they funded it, paid for the prizes, set up the assembly, calculated how to give the prizes. To get nominated for a community service prize, mom or dad would write a note, and the kids would write out a certificate. The kids nominated got tickets that were dropped in a bin. Some teachers gave academic awards. Winners had names selected from the bin. We gave out 2 iPods and 2 bikes as prizes. Most of the prizes were dedicated to physical fitness. The kids came up with that [idea] alone.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

When asked about plans for monitoring student progress, the superintendent smiles and says he will let the middle school principal tell about "the red books." He did – with apparent pleasure that teachers now are using data that they previously had been hesitant to embrace.

Let me give you some history. The previous superintendent was very focused on data. … She converted all the Terra Nova scores to the teacher that year, correlated with the results of the teacher the year before. She put them in "Red Books." It was very threatening to elementary and middle school teachers. They had never seen that. … Then there started to be a comparison between Terra Novas and the state tests—and they were not the same test. People were getting pretty upset. When that superintendent left, I told them I would not give them the Red Books, but they still asked for them. … They wanted to know how they did. When I gave them out, I didn't give the name of the previous year's teacher. …We used them to determine our AIS [Academic Intervention Services] classes.

Now the school uses student data often and in a number of ways. The guidance counselor is in charge of data and eager to show researchers the number of ways he has prepared data for specific teacher requests. Using a popular data management system, with a few key strokes he is able to provide faculty with an item analysis on any standardized test for each student as well as for an identified population. While he says he handles most of the contact with the system, a number of teachers are becoming more savvy with using the system—and technology in general—to provide information about student progress and learning.

And teachers express their appreciation for the way data in Holland are used:

This is not a number-driven school. I have never been told my numbers had to increase in regards to the test scores or local testing. It helps free teachers up. They are not looking over their shoulders or worried all the time. We do talk about the numbers. We talk about how the students did, not placing blame. We discuss things and know how students do.

Students in the middle school take grade consistent assessments three times during the year - twice during the year and at the final exam. Teachers look at these assessments for learning gaps and for program change needs. For example, a science teacher talks about trying a number of different ways to help students understand density. He says he has already talked with next year's science teacher and recommended more review time of that concept with these students next year.

Final exams may be under future review. The eighth-grade testing schedule seems overly daunting, and the principal has felt that the students get test weary. He has asked the faculty if

they could drop the eighth-grade final exams and use the four quarter grades for the average instead. Seventh-grade teachers have asked to do the same thing. Board policy includes a final exam in each academic subject in the middle school—so for now all classes take final exams.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments

Shared Leadership and Decision Making
In Holland, thoughtful development and support of plans to address issues and deficiencies is encouraged. Teachers are supported and encouraged to take risks in novel ways in order to address what they see as issues.

The principal describes three innovative plans on the books for next year and the year after.

> *We have three ideas in the works for next year. The eighth-grade English teacher has been pestering me for years to run a class for just boys. She has been reading [about this a lot]…and wants to see what impact an all boys' class might have. I had to run it by the PTA, the board, and have a letter sent from the superintendent. We had to ask all the seventh-grade parents if they would be willing to have a child participate. How does it match the numbers? It just happens that there are 11 more boys in that [seventh-grade] class.*
>   *The other two ideas [are] in fifth- and sixth-grades. The math tests happen in March, so the curriculum actually runs March to March. In March of next year, the fifth-grade math teacher will give the fifth graders over to the sixth-grade teacher for math. The fifth-grade teacher will then pick up the sixth-grade math students and get them ready for seventh-grade math until the end of the year. The problems came with changing the fifth-grade teachers' schedule. Let's pilot it and see if it works.*
>   *The third idea comes with wanting a rotating schedule because ninth-period classes are slugs when compared to the energy of period 1 classes. We are so small that the problem comes with the language teachers that we share with the high school. We might only be able to rotate seventh and eighth graders.*

Modeling Reflective Practice
Modeling and developing methods for critical and reflective practice are part of the culture at Holland. In addition to teachers using team meeting time for continual reflective discussion, the principal uses faculty meetings for the same purpose. For example, before a faculty meeting, he recently distributed an article about homework to the faculty as a discussion prompt. A teacher found and distributed an article that posed a counter argument. The purpose of the resulting exchange was not necessarily to make a policy decision. Instead, it served to frame points about the purposes of homework and projects for justification to parents. It provided an important opportunity to review and reinforce consistent connections between assignments and academic goals.

Monitoring of Students
The principal personally monitors students who are at risk of falling behind. Every five weeks, students receive either school report cards or five-week reports that model the report card form. The principal keeps a notebook of all at-risk students. At each of these five-week reporting times, he goes to these students' teacher teams and confers about progress of and plans for each of these students. Adjustments may take the form of assigning students to the after-school

academic program, establishing weekly contact with the parents, and/or designing more personal and specific interventions. For example, several students were consistently missing school and disengaged from academic programs yet were finding some success in their technology classes. With the technology teacher, the principal set up some parent group meetings and scheduled them in the late afternoon or early evening to accommodate the parents' schedules. The group discussions focused on common issues and on collectively finding some home-school connections to help these students find more success. When the discussions started, six students were seriously at risk. In May, three of them were "going to make it" and two more were showing improvement. Such interventions continue.

The guidance counselor has set up an on-line homework program that allows parents to check on student assignments from home. He updates the site near the end of every school day with assignments that teachers send to him. He says that many Holland homes have access to online information and that the program is a big help to students who have been absent from class and parents who want to stay abreast of current assignments.

In a Nutshell

Holland is a school district of fiscal restraint whose community mindedness, civic pride, and concern for all students is supported by a culture of shared respect and responsibility.

Holland Middle School
Holland Central School District
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http://www.teacherweb.com/ny/holland/middleschool/h2.stm

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[i] This case study is one of 10 produced as part of a larger study of middle schools conducted during the 2006-07 school year. Research teams investigated 10 consistently higher-performing and six average-performing middle schools based on student performance on New York State Assessments of 8th-grade English Language Arts and Mathematics. Researchers used site-based interviews of teachers and administrators, as well as the analysis of supportive documentation, to determine differences in practices between higher- and average-performing schools in the sample. In half the higher-performing schools, poverty levels meet or exceed the state average (as measured by the percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch). Average-performing schools were matched as closely as possible to the higher performers in terms of student poverty levels, geographic location, size, and student ethnicity. Results were organized along five broad themes that form the framework of the national Just for the Kids Study of which the New York study is part. The national study is sponsored by the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA).

[ii] Demographic data are from the 2005-06 New York State Report Card (https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb/Home.do). This study was conducted in Spring, 2007.