

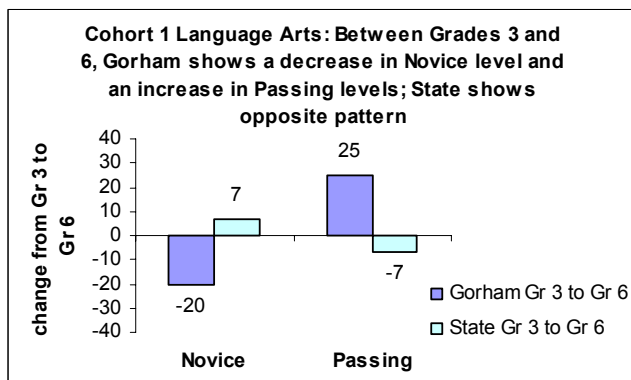
# Eval Brief: CO-SEED and Academic Achievement at Gorham Elementary School

*Antioch New England Institute's Community-based School Environmental Education (CO-SEED) Project exposes students to hands-on, real-world learning experiences and strives to strengthen community ties and promote appreciation for the natural world, while enhancing students' academic engagement and achievement. CO-SEED sought to explore the relationship between participation in this place-based education program and student academic achievement, as measured by standardized state tests. Gorham Elementary School in Gorham, New Hampshire, where CO-SEED was implemented from 1998 through 2002, was chosen as one of several sites for this investigation. A cursory analysis conducted during the 2003-2004 evaluation indicated that there may have been notable improvements in test scores during CO-SEED's tenure at Gorham, particularly for students as they progressed from third to sixth grade. This brief is part of a larger study conducted by external evaluators from PEER Associates, Inc.*

To compare student academic achievement before and after the introduction of CO-SEED, students were grouped into eight sequential cohorts spanning academic years 1993-1994 through 2003-2004. The analysis used test scores from the New Hampshire Educational Improvement and Assessment Program (NHEIAP), focusing on the percent of students scoring in various proficiency categories.

## *Local versus State Trends in Proficiency Categories*

At the State level, achievement scores decrease as students progress from Grade 3 to 6, with each cohort generating more students in the Novice category and correspondingly fewer in the Passing category. In Gorham, however, achievement scores *increase*. Comparable cohorts show fewer students in the Novice category and more in the Passing category as they progress from Grades 3 to 6. This pattern was present from Cohort 1, before the introduction of CO-SEED, and continued through Cohort 8, which marks the end of CO-SEED's tenure. The graph at left is a typical example.



These data show remarkably consistent and impressive trends in Gorham achievement between Grades 3 and 6. A similarly striking pattern persisted in analysis of rank in state scores as well. Although previous qualitative evaluation data attest to an important role for CO-SEED in Gorham's achievement, the data presented here reveal that this trend pre-dated the introduction of CO-SEED, and thus must be at least in part due to some pre-existing attributes of this school system.

- ❖ It is possible that highly competent teachers between Grade 3 and 6 in Gorham were more prepared or primed to be receptive to a place-based education program. CO-SEED may have capitalized on this resource, helping to make it a successful form of teaching in Gorham.
- ❖ As a relatively intense, multi-year program, CO-SEED could have easily distracted teachers from test preparation or had an otherwise deleterious effect, which it did not. This alone attests to the success of a nontraditional, highly experiential and innovative curriculum such as CO-SEED.
- ❖ The real value of CO-SEED may not show up in standardized test scores, especially in an already high-performing environment such as Gorham. However, it remains possible that in an under-performing but 'ready' context, CO-SEED may have more visible impact on student test scores. Other quantitative and qualitative CO-SEED evaluation data show strong evidence of changes in educator practice (especially using local resources for teaching, and teacher engagement, collaboration, and professional growth), as well as student attachment to place and school level culture changes. The Gorham study suggests that at the very least, CO-SEED does not hurt standardized test scores.