District Review Report

Athol-Royalston Regional School District

Comprehensive review conducted January 14–17, 2019

Office of District Reviews and Monitoring

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Commissioner

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Executive Summary

At the time of the onsite review in January 2019, the Athol-Royalston Regional School District was in the second year of a comprehensive initiative designed to transform and revitalize the district. Led by the superintendent, who has assembled a team of district and school leaders, the district has developed and has been implementing an ambitious strategic plan that prioritizes improvement efforts.

The district’s 2018–2021 strategic plan includes five major goals spanning culture and communication, teaching and learning, finance, facilities, and community partnerships. In practice, leaders and teams at every level focus their work on “…improving academic achievement by engaging all students....” When stakeholders in the district talk about the goal of “student engagement,” some mean students actively participating in learning within a classroom setting. Others are talking about a broader notion of “student engagement” seen through the lens of students’ social-emotional development. This broader meaning of student engagement concerns persisting in school in spite of barriers to learning, developing self-management skills, developing a plan for life after high school, and graduating with appropriate skills for career, post-secondary education, and civic opportunities. The district’s strategic plan makes social-emotional learning (SEL) one of its three priority strategic objectives and closely aligns SEL with the broader definition of “student engagement.”

The district’s leaders maintain a disciplined focus on making progress toward the district’s three priority strategic objectives: daily literacy instruction across the curriculum; the creation and use of a tiered system of emotional, social and behavioral support to ensure high levels of student engagement; and the collection, analysis, and use of data to drive learning-related decision-making, districtwide. These priority strategic objectives guide the content and regular updates of all four schools’ improvement or turnaround plans, and appear in multiple additional planning and organizing documents. In multiple interviews, leaders at every level in the district repeatedly emphasized these strategic objectives.

The superintendent, central office staff, and school leaders lead a fast-paced and ambitious effort to transform instruction, student learning, and student and school outcomes, and they make regular use of the district’s strategic plan and the closely aligned, data-rich school improvement and turnaround plans. They use multiple leadership structures and teams to distribute responsibility across many roles, to ensure that many voices are heard in the process of implementing the work. This model of distributed leadership includes work with the school committee. A review of videos of school committee meetings indicated that the superintendent routinely asked central office and school leaders to lead presentations to the school committee on core issues such as accountability, special education, and data-driven improvement. The superintendent always weighed in during the conversations with the school committee, but clearly sought to delegate leadership to multiple other leaders on her team.

The superintendent and school committee have made the implementation of core elements of the strategic plan integral to her job description. They specifically assess her impact on the district’s progress on literacy, social and emotional learning, and data use, in her annual evaluation. When the school committee recently expressed its desire to receive and use more student data in its deliberations, the superintendent added this expectation as one of the educator evaluation goals for which she would be held accountable.

The district is engaged in rapid change and places high levels of demand on the time and energy of educators at every level of the organization. Many stakeholders made clear that they were working very hard indeed. This pace, together with the demands of the change process, is a constant focus of educators. While leaders have used this focus to begin to create a shared understanding of the direction in which they hope to take the schools, in interviews, many teachers, administrators, students, and family members said that they were overwhelmed by the pace and scale of change.

**Instruction**

The team observed 51 classes throughout the district: 15 at the high school, 17 middle-grade classrooms (grades 5–8), and 19 elementary-grade classrooms (K–4). The team observed 19 ELA classes, 19 mathematics classes, 8 science classes, 4 social studies/history classes, and 1 ELA/math class. The observations were approximately 20 minutes in length. All review team members collected data using DESE’s Instructional Inventory, a tool for recording observed characteristics of standards-based teaching. This data is presented in Appendix C.

The review team found a generally high incidence of characteristics of high-quality instruction in observed elementary (K–4) classes and middle-grade (5­­–8) classrooms in the district. In observed high-school classes, the team noted a generally low incidence of characteristics of effective instruction. The team was impressed by the range and quality of efforts to improve instruction, including substantive work by instructional leadership teams, the recent introduction of common planning time, evidence of a high incidence of learning walks tied to follow-up discussions with teachers, and the widespread use of common formative assessments.

**Strengths**

* The superintendent, school committee members, and other district leaders concentrate on a small number of priority strategic objectives, work collaboratively and transparently to plan and develop policy, and regularly use student outcome data to monitor and support progress toward strategic goals.
* The superintendent, central office administrators, and school leaders use rapidly paced, nimble resource reallocation to enable educators to address students’ learning needs, soon after those needs have been identified. Some of these changes are driven by a commitment to equity. Administrators research and apply for government and private grants to provide additional resources and opportunities to support positive student outcomes.
* In observed classrooms, the review team found a generally high incidence of characteristics of high-quality instruction in elementary (K–4) and middle-grade (5–8) classrooms.
* The district has implemented a number of important districtwide initiatives to improve curriculum and instruction.
* The district is establishing a data-literate culture through the collection and review of multiple assessments and other outcome data and the use of data analysis to inform decision-making.
* District leaders have designed data analysis processes and a collaborative structure for groups of educators to meet regularly to use data to inform decision-making.
* The district demonstrates a genuine commitment to providing professional development that addresses district priorities, supports teachers’ growth, and is informed by student performance data and other data sources and assessments of instructional programs and practice.
* District and town leaders have demonstrated their commitment to improving and maintaining school buildings and systems through comprehensive planning and investments in new school buildings.

**Challenges and Areas for Growth**

In observed classrooms, review team members found a generally lower incidence of characteristics of effective instruction at the high school.

The district has not provided sufficient support to build educators’ capacity to analyze and use data to improve teaching and learning. The district has not developed an effective way to share assessment results and students’ progress with families districtwide.

* The district’s educator evaluation system does not prioritize opportunities for educators to receive high-quality feedback[[1]](#footnote-1) that helps them improve their practice.
  + - The district’s professional development program does not have clearly articulated and measurable goals and objectives related to desired student outcomes.
    - The district has launched initiatives to improve student engagement. The district has not sufficiently supported teachers in implementing these initiatives.

The district is facing high numbers of students who are choosing to enroll in other districts.

The district’s budget documents are not clear, comprehensive, and easily accessible by all constituents.

**Recommendations**

* The district should improve communication with all stakeholders about multiple simultaneous efforts being implemented to increase student engagement. The conversations should also address the nature of school change overall, including what is known from research about the time it takes to see meaningful changes in the practices of educators and in students’ outcomes.
* The district should ensure that all teachers provide effective instruction that challenges and supports all students.
* District leaders should build educators’ capacity to analyze and use data to improve teaching and learning and provide timely and effective information to families about their students’ progress toward attaining grade-level standards.

The district should promote educators’ growth by fully implementing all components of the educator evaluation system, with a particular emphasis on ensuring that all educators receive high-quality feedback.

* + - The district should develop a professional development program that is informed by data and that includes measurable goals and objectives aligned with district, school, and educator goals.

The district should ensure that it sufficiently supports teachers in implementing its initiatives to increase student engagement.

* + District leaders and town officials should continue to work strategically and collaboratively to improve all students’ performance, opportunities, and outcomes.
* The district should continue its efforts to maintain and improve the high school to provide the learning environment and support academic opportunities that all students deserve.
* The district should develop a budget document that is clear and comprehensive, detailing how the budget supports district and school goals and priorities, how much programs cost, and how outside funds are used.

Athol-Royalston RSD District Review Overview

Purpose

Conducted under Chapter 15, Section 55A of the Massachusetts General Laws, comprehensive district reviews support local school districts in establishing or strengthening a cycle of continuous improvement. Reviews consider carefully the effectiveness of systemwide functions, with reference to the six district standards used by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE): Leadership and Governance, Curriculum and Instruction, Assessment, Human Resources and Professional Development, Student Support, and Financial and Asset Management. Reviews identify systems and practices that may be impeding improvement as well as those most likely to be contributing to positive results. In addition to providing information to each district reviewed, DESE uses review reports to identify resources and/or technical assistance to provide to the district.

Methodology

Reviews collect evidence for each of the six district standards above. A district review team consisting of independent consultants with expertise in each of the district standards reviews documentation, data, and reports for two days before conducting a four-day district visit that includes visits to individual schools. The team conducts interviews and focus group sessions with such stakeholders as school committee members, teachers’ association representatives, administrators, teachers, students, and students’ families. Team members also observe classroom instruction. Subsequent to the onsite review, the team meets for two days to develop findings and recommendations before submitting a draft report to DESE. DESE edits and fact-checks the draft report and sends it to the district for factual review before publishing it on the DESE website.

Site Visit

The site visit to the Athol-Royalston Regional School District was conducted from January 14–17, 2019. The site visit included 42 hours of interviews and focus groups with approximately 173 stakeholders, including school committee members, district administrators, school staff, students, students’ families, and teachers’ association representatives. The review team conducted 3 teacher focus groups, with 45 elementary-school teachers, 25 middle-school teachers, and 28 high-school teachers.

A list of review team members, information about review activities, and the site visit schedule are in Appendix A, and Appendix B provides information about enrollment, attendance, and expenditures. The team observed classroom instruction in 51 classrooms in all 4 schools. The team collected data using DESE’s Instructional Inventory, a tool for recording observed characteristics of standards-based teaching. This data is contained in Appendix C.

**District Profile**

The Athol-Royalston Regional School District was formed in 1956. The district has four schools, down from six in 2011–2012.[[2]](#footnote-2) One town-owned elementary school is located in Royalston and the other three schools are in Athol: one town-owned elementary school, the regional middle school, and the regional high school.

Athol and Royalston each have a town manager form of government. The regional school district’s school committee has 10 members, 7 from Athol and 3 from Royalston; the school committee meets monthly.

The superintendent has been in the position since July 2017. The district leadership team includes the curriculum director, the director of pupil services, and the business manager. Central office positions have been mostly stable in number in recent years. The district has four principals leading four schools, three assistant principals, and an early education director. In the 2017–2018 school year, there were 109.5 teachers in the district.

In the 2017–2018 school year, 1,500 students were enrolled in the district’s schools:

**Table 1: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**

**Schools, Type, Grades Served, and Enrollment,\* 2017–2018**

| **School** | **Type** | **Grades Served** | **Enrollment** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Athol Community Elementary School | EES | Pre-K–4 | 602 |
| Royalston Community School | ES | K–6 | 139 |
| Athol-Royalston Middle School | MS | 5–8 | 391 |
| Athol High | HS | 9-12 | 368 |
| **Totals** | **4 schools** | **Pre-K–12** | **1,500** |
| \*As of October 1, 2017 | | | |

Between 2014 and 2018 overall student enrollment increased by 4.4 percent. Enrollment figures by race/ethnicity and high needs populations (i.e., students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, and English learners (ELs) and former ELs) as compared with the state are provided in Tables B1a and B1b in Appendix B.

The total in-district per-pupil expenditure was higher than the median in-district per-pupil expenditure for 48 districts of similar size (1,000–1,999 students) in fiscal year 2017; $14,634 as compared with $14,233 (see [District Analysis and Review Tool Detail: Staffing & Finance](http://www.doe.mass.edu/dart/) ). Actual net school spending has been above what is required by the Chapter 70 state education aid program, as shown in Table B3 in Appendix B.

Student Performance

**Note:** The Next-Generation MCAS assessment is administered to grades 3–8 in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics; it was administered for the first time in 2017. (For more information, see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/parents/results-faq.html>.) The MCAS is administered to grades 5 and 8 in science and to grade 10 in ELA, math, and science. Data from the two assessments are presented separately because the tests are different and cannot be compared.

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| **Table 2: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Accountability Percentile, Criterion Reference Target (CRT) Percentage, Reason for Classification** | | | | |
| **School** | **Accountability Percentile** | **CRT Percentage** | **Overall Classification** | **Reason For Classification** |
| Athol Community Elementary School | 4 | 71% | Requiring assistance or intervention | In need of broad/comprehensive support: Underperforming school.  Low subgroup performance for White, economically disadvantaged, and high needs students |
| Royalston Community School | 56 | 96% | Not requiring assistance or intervention | School of Recognition: High Growth-Exceeding Targets |
| Athol-Royalston Middle School | 20 | 48% | Not requiring assistance or intervention | Partially meeting targets |
| Athol High | 11 | 63% | Requiring assistance or intervention | In need of focused/targeted support: Low subgroup performance for White and high needs students |
| Athol-Royalston (District) | -- | 76% | Not requiring assistance or intervention | Meeting targets |

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| **Table 3: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Next-Generation MCAS ELA Scaled Scores grades 3–8, 2017–2018** | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2018)** | | **2017** | | **2018** | | **Change** | | **State (2018)** | **Above/Below** |
| African American/Black | 9 | | -- | | -- | | -- | | 490.3 | -- |
| Asian | 6 | | -- | | -- | | -- | | 511.6 | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | 63 | | 481.3 | | 491.7 | | 10.4 | | 489.7 | 2.0 |
| Multi-Race | 28 | | 480.5 | | 486.5 | | 6.0 | | 502.8 | -16.3 |
| White | 563 | | 488.0 | | 492.6 | | 4.6 | | 504.2 | -11.6 |
| High Needs | 428 | | 480.9 | | 486.4 | | 5.5 | | 490.1 | -3.7 |
| Econ. Dis. | 359 | | 482.2 | | 487.6 | | 5.4 | | 490.2 | -2.6 |
| SWD | 176 | | 470.8 | | 475.2 | | 4.4 | | 480.8 | -5.6 |
| EL | 26 | | 477.9 | | 492.6 | | 14.7 | | 488.4 | 4.2 |
| All | 669 | | 487.2 | | 492.4 | | 5.2 | | 500.5 | -8.1 |
| Next Generation MCAS Achievement Levels: 440–470 Not Meeting Expectations; 470–500 Partially Meeting Expectations; 500–530 Meeting Expectations; 530–560 Exceeding Expectations | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Table 4: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Next-Generation MCAS Math Scaled Scores grades 3–8, 2017–2018** | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Group** | | **N (2018)** | | **2017** | | **2018** | | **Change** | **State (2018)** | **Above/Below** |
| African American/Black | | 9 | | -- | | -- | | -- | 486.9 | -- |
| Asian | | 6 | | -- | | -- | | -- | 514.3 | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | | 64 | | 480.1 | | 486.2 | | 6.1 | 487.4 | -1.2 |
| Multi-Race | | 28 | | 480.5 | | 480.3 | | -0.2 | 499.7 | -19.4 |
| White | | 562 | | 487.6 | | 490.8 | | 3.2 | 501.8 | -11.0 |
| High Needs | | 429 | | 481.2 | | 484.2 | | 3.0 | 488.2 | -4.0 |
| Econ. Dis. | | 360 | | 481.7 | | 484.9 | | 3.2 | 487.7 | -2.8 |
| SWD | | 177 | | 471.7 | | 474.4 | | 2.7 | 479.2 | -4.8 |
| EL | | 26 | | 476.0 | | 486.7 | | 10.7 | 488.5 | -1.8 |
| All | | 669 | | 486.7 | | 490.0 | | 3.3 | 498.4 | -8.4 |
| Next Generation MCAS Achievement Levels: 440–470 Not Meeting Expectations; 470–500 Partially Meeting Expectations; 500–530 Meeting Expectations; 530–560 Exceeding Expectations | | | | | | | | | | |

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| **Table 5: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Next-Generation MCAS ELA Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations Grades 3–8, 2017–2018** | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2018)** | **2017** | **2018** | **Change** | **State (2018)** | **Above/Below** |
| African American/Black | 9 | -- | -- | -- | 31% | -- |
| Asian | 6 | -- | -- | -- | 71% | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | 63 | 14% | 25% | 11% | 31% | -6% |
| Multi-Race | 28 | 27% | 18% | -9% | 54% | -36% |
| White | 563 | 27% | 38% | 11% | 58% | -20% |
| High Needs | 428 | 16% | 26% | 10% | 31% | -5% |
| Econ. Dis. | 359 | 18% | 27% | 9% | 32% | -5% |
| SWD | 176 | 5% | 11% | 6% | 14% | -3% |
| EL | 26 | 15% | 31% | 16% | 30% | 1% |
| All | 669 | 26% | 36% | 10% | 51% | -15% |

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| **Table 6: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Next-Generation MCAS Math Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations Grades 3–8, 2017–2018** | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2018)** | **2017** | **2018** | **Change** | **State (2018)** | **Above/Below** |
| African American/Black | 9 | -- | -- | -- | 26% | -- |
| Asian | 6 | -- | -- | -- | 74% | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | 64 | 18% | 19% | 1% | 27% | -8% |
| Multi-Race | 28 | 14% | 11% | -3% | 49% | -38% |
| White | 562 | 27% | 35% | 8% | 55% | -20% |
| High Needs | 429 | 18% | 21% | 3% | 28% | -7% |
| Econ. Dis. | 360 | 18% | 23% | 5% | 27% | -4% |
| SWD | 177 | 9% | 10% | 1% | 14% | -4% |
| EL | 26 | 10% | 19% | 9% | 30% | -11% |
| All | 669 | 26% | 33% | 7% | 48% | -15% |

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| **Table 7: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **MCAS ELA Percent Scoring Proficient or Advanced in Grade 10, 2017–2018** | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2018)** | **2017** | **2018** | **Change** | **State (2018)** | **Above/Below** |
| African American/Black | 3 | -- | -- | -- | 85% | -- |
| Asian | 2 | -- | -- | -- | 95% | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | 5 | -- | -- | -- | 78% | -- |
| Multi-Race | 1 | -- | -- | -- | 93% | -- |
| White | 79 | 76% | 87% | 11% | 94% | -7% |
| High Needs | 51 | 67% | 78% | 11% | 79% | -1% |
| Econ. Dis. | 46 | 67% | 80% | 13% | 81% | -1% |
| SWD | 14 | 42% | 36% | -6% | 69% | -33% |
| EL | 1 | -- | -- | -- | 64% | -- |
| All | 90 | 78% | 88% | 10% | 91% | -3% |

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| **Table 8: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **MCAS Math Percent Scoring Proficient or Advanced in Grade 10, 2017–2018** | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2018)** | **2017** | **2018** | **Change** | **State (2018)** | **Above/Below** |
| African American/Black | 3 | -- | -- | -- | 60% | -- |
| Asian | 2 | -- | -- | -- | 91% | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | 5 | -- | -- | -- | 56% | -- |
| Multi-Race | 1 | -- | -- | -- | 79% | -- |
| White | 77 | 49% | 62% | 13% | 85% | -23% |
| High Needs | 50 | 28% | 48% | 20% | 57% | -9% |
| Econ. Dis. | 45 | 30% | 49% | 19% | 59% | -10% |
| SWD | 13 | 8% | 15% | 7% | 40% | -25% |
| EL | 1 | -- | -- | -- | 44% | -- |
| All | 88 | 46% | 64% | 18% | 78% | -14% |

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| **Table 9: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **MCAS Science Percent Scoring Proficient or Advanced in Grades 5, 8, and 10, 2015–2018** | | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2018)** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **4-yr change** | **State (2018)** |
| African American/Black | 5 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 30% |
| Asian | 4 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 68% |
| Hispanic or Latino | 19 | 30% | 26% | 14% | 21% | -9% | 30% |
| Multi-Race | 10 | -- | -- | -- | 30% | -- | 54% |
| White | 259 | 37% | 38% | 35% | 36% | -1% | 60% |
| High Needs | 181 | 25% | 27% | 23% | 23% | -2% | 31% |
| Econ. Dis. | 154 | 26% | 27% | 22% | 26% | 0% | 32% |
| SWD | 71 | 13% | 15% | 12% | 7% | -6% | 21% |
| EL | 11 | -- | -- | -- | 9% | -- | 20% |
| All | 297 | 35% | 37% | 34% | 35% | 0% | 53% |

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| **Table 10: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Next-Generation MCAS ELA Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations in Grades 3–8, 2017–2018** | | | | | | |
| **Grade** | **N (2018)** | **2017** | **2018** | **Change** | **State (2018)** | **Above/Below** |
| 3 | 117 | 21% | 40% | 19% | 52% | -12% |
| 4 | 120 | 17% | 23% | 6% | 53% | -30% |
| 5 | 120 | 24% | 44% | 20% | 54% | -10% |
| 6 | 111 | 37% | 44% | 7% | 51% | -7% |
| 7 | 95 | 29% | 24% | -5% | 46% | -22% |
| 8 | 106 | 32% | 41% | 9% | 51% | -10% |
| 3–8 | 669 | 26% | 36% | 10% | 51% | -15% |

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| **Table 11: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Next-Generation MCAS Math Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations in Grades 3–8, 2017–2018** | | | | | | |
| **Grade** | **N (2018)** | **2017** | **2018** | **Change** | **State (2018)** | **Above/Below** |
| 3 | 117 | 23% | 42% | 19% | 50% | -8% |
| 4 | 121 | 18% | 21% | 3% | 48% | -27% |
| 5 | 120 | 27% | 39% | 12% | 46% | -7% |
| 6 | 112 | 37% | 28% | -9% | 47% | -19% |
| 7 | 94 | 25% | 32% | 7% | 46% | -14% |
| 8 | 105 | 28% | 34% | 6% | 50% | -16% |
| 3–8 | 669 | 26% | 33% | 7% | 48% | -15% |

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| **Table 12: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **MCAS Science Percent Scoring Proficient or Advanced in Grades 5, 8, and 10, 2015–2018** | | | | | | | |
| **Grade** | **N (2018)** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **4-yr change** | **State (2018)** |
| 5 | 120 | 27% | 38% | 23% | 46% | 19% | 47% |
| 8 | 104 | 29% | 21% | 35% | 8% | -21% | 35% |
| 10 | 73 | 56% | 55% | 49% | 56% | 0% | 74% |
| All | 297 | 35% | 37% | 34% | 35% | 0% | 52% |

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| **Table 13: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **English Language Arts and Math Mean Student Growth Percentile, 2018** | | | | | | |
|  | **ELA** | | | **Math** | | |
| **Grade** | **N (2018)** | **2018** | **State 2018** | **N (2018)** | **2018** | **State (2018)** |
| 3 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| 4 | 110 | 41.1 | 50.0 | 110 | 46.1 | 50.1 |
| 5 | 113 | 65.5 | 50.1 | 112 | 68.1 | 50.0 |
| 6 | 98 | 60.7 | 50.1 | 98 | 52.6 | 50.0 |
| 7 | 88 | 37.5 | 50.0 | 87 | 44.6 | 50.0 |
| 8 | 99 | 66.9 | 50.0 | 98 | 46.2 | 50.0 |
| 10 | 74 | 46.9 | 49.9 | 74 | 47.1 | 49.9 |

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| **Table 14: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Next-Generation MCAS ELA Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations by Grade and School, 2018** | | | | | | | |
| **School** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **3–8** |
| Athol Community | 40% | 16% | -- | -- | -- | -- | 28% |
| Royalston Community | 53% | 61% | 65% | 57% | -- | -- | 59% |
| Athol-Royalston Middle | -- | -- | 40% | 43% | 24% | 42% | 37% |
| District | 40% | 23% | 44% | 44% | 24% | 41% | 36% |
| State | 52% | 53% | 54% | 51% | 46% | 51% | 51% |

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| **Table 15: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Next-Generation MCAS Math Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations by Grade and School, 2018** | | | | | | | |
| **School** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **3–8** |
| Athol Community | 41% | 16% | -- | -- | -- | -- | 28% |
| Royalston Community | 53% | 56% | 48% | 52% | -- | -- | 52% |
| Athol-Royalston Middle | -- | -- | 38% | 23% | 30% | 35% | 32% |
| District | 42% | 21% | 39% | 28% | 32% | 34% | 33% |
| State | 50% | 48% | 46% | 47% | 46% | 50% | 48% |

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| **Table 16: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **MCAS ELA and Math Percent Scoring Proficient or Advanced in Grade 10, 2018** | | |
| **School** | **ELA** | **Math** |
| Athol High | 89% | 65% |
| State | 91% | 78% |

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| **Table 17: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **MCAS Science Percent Scoring Proficient or Advanced by School and Grade, 2018** | | | | | | | | |
| **School** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **10** | **Total** |
| Athol Community | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Royalston Community | -- | -- | 35% | -- | -- | -- | -- | 35% |
| Athol-Royalston Middle | -- | -- | 49% | -- | -- | 8% | -- | 28% |
| Athol High | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 56% | 56% |
| State | -- | -- | 47% | -- | -- | 35% | 74% | 52% |

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| **Table 18: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Next-Generation MCAS ELA Percent Meeting and Exceeding Expectations by School, 2018** | | | | | | | | | | |
| **School** | **All** | **High Needs** | **Econ. Dis.** | **SWD** | **EL** | **African American** | **Asian** | **Hispanic** | **Multi-race** | **White** |
| Athol Community | 28% | 22% | 22% | 13% | -- | -- | -- | 22% | 20% | 29% |
| Royalston Community | 59% | 38% | 40% | 15% | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 60% |
| Athol-Royalston Middle | 37% | 27% | 29% | 11% | 29% | -- | -- | 30% | 19% | 39% |
| District | 36% | 26% | 27% | 11% | 31% | -- | -- | 25% | 18% | 38% |
| State | 51% | 31% | 32% | 14% | 30% | 31% | 71% | 31% | 54% | 58% |

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| **Table 19: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Next-Generation MCAS Math Percent Meeting and Exceeding Expectations by School, 2018** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **School** | | **All** | | **High Needs** | | **Econ. Dis.** | | | **SWD** | | | **EL** | | | **African American** | | **Asian** | | | **Hispanic** | | | **Multi-race** | | **White** |
| Athol Community | | 28% | | 26% | | 26% | | | 10% | | | -- | | | -- | | -- | | | 22% | | | 10% | | 30% |
| Royalston Community | | 52% | | 30% | | 31% | | | 23% | | | -- | | | -- | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | 53% |
| Athol-Royalston Middle | | 32% | | 19% | | 21% | | | 9% | | | 12% | | | -- | | -- | | | 19% | | | 13% | | 35% |
| District | | 33% | | 21% | | 23% | | | 10% | | | 19% | | | -- | | -- | | | 19% | | | 11% | | 35% |
| State | | 48% | | 28% | | 27% | | | 14% | | | 30% | | | 26% | | 74% | | | 27% | | | 49% | | 55% |
| **Table 20: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **MCAS ELA and Math Percent Scoring Proficient or Advanced in Grade 10, 2015–2018** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | **ELA** | | | | | | | | | | | | **Math** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **School/Group** | **2015** | | **2016** | | **2017** | | | **2018** | | **4-yrChange** | | | **2015** | | | **2016** | | | **2017** | | | **2018** | | **4-yr Change** | |
| Athol High | 86% | | 85% | | 79% | | | 89% | | 3% | | | 56% | | | 65% | | | 50% | | | 65% | | 9% | |
| African American/Black | -- | | -- | | -- | | | -- | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | -- | |
| Asian | -- | | -- | | -- | | | -- | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | -- | |
| Hispanic | -- | | -- | | -- | | | -- | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | -- | |
| Multi-race | -- | | -- | | -- | | | -- | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | -- | |
| White | 87% | | 87% | | 77% | | | 88% | | 1% | | | 58% | | | 66% | | | 52% | | | 63% | | 5% | |
| High Needs | 77% | | 71% | | 69% | | | 80% | | 3% | | | 33% | | | 53% | | | 30% | | | 48% | | 15% | |
| Econ. Dis. | 80% | | 76% | | 69% | | | 82% | | 2% | | | 38% | | | 59% | | | 33% | | | 49% | | 11% | |
| SWD | 57% | | 45% | | 45% | | | 38% | | -19% | | | 10% | | | 20% | | | 9% | | | 17% | | 7% | |
| EL | -- | | -- | | -- | | | -- | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | -- | |
| **Table 21: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **MCAS Science Percent Scoring Proficient or Advanced in Science by School and Student Group, 2015–2018** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **School** | | | | | | | **N (2018)** | | | | **2015** | | | **2016** | | | | **2017** | | | **2018** | | | **4-yr Change** | | |
| Athol Community | | | | | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| Royalston Community | | | | | | | 23 | | | | 32% | | | 26% | | | | 22% | | | 35% | | | 3% | | |
| African American/Black | | | | | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| Asian | | | | | | | 1 | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| Hispanic | | | | | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| Multi-race | | | | | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| White | | | | | | | 22 | | | | 38% | | | 27% | | | | 21% | | | 32% | | | -6% | | |
| High Needs | | | | | | | 13 | | | | -- | | | 9% | | | | 20% | | | 31% | | | -- | | |
| Econ. Dis. | | | | | | | 11 | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | 36% | | | -- | | |
| SWD | | | | | | | 3 | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| EL | | | | | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| Athol-Royalston Middle | | | | | | | 195 | | | | 29% | | | 32% | | | | 30% | | | 28% | | | -1% | | |
| African American/Black | | | | | | | 2 | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| Asian | | | | | | | 1 | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| Hispanic | | | | | | | 16 | | | | -- | | | 21% | | | | 9% | | | 25% | | | -- | | |
| Multi-race | | | | | | | 9 | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| White | | | | | | | 167 | | | | 30% | | | 33% | | | | 32% | | | 29% | | | -1% | | |
| High Needs | | | | | | | 126 | | | | 24% | | | 26% | | | | 19% | | | 20% | | | -4% | | |
| Econ. Dis. | | | | | | | 106 | | | | 25% | | | 28% | | | | 19% | | | 23% | | | -2% | | |
| SWD | | | | | | | 55 | | | | 13% | | | 14% | | | | 7% | | | 5% | | | -8% | | |
| EL | | | | | | | 10 | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | 10% | | | -- | | |
| Athol High | | | | | | | 73 | | | | 57% | | | 57% | | | | 50% | | | 56% | | | -1% | | |
| African American/Black | | | | | | | 3 | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| Asian | | | | | | | 2 | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| Hispanic | | | | | | | 2 | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| Multi-race | | | | | | | 1 | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |
| White | | | | | | | 65 | | | | 56% | | | 60% | | | | 50% | | | 55% | | | -1% | | |
| High Needs | | | | | | | 37 | | | | 33% | | | 40% | | | | 31% | | | 35% | | | 2% | | |
| Econ. Dis. | | | | | | | 33 | | | | 34% | | | 38% | | | | 30% | | | 36% | | | 2% | | |
| SWD | | | | | | | 10 | | | | 22% | | | 25% | | | | 14% | | | 10% | | | -12% | | |
| EL | | | | | | | 1 | | | | -- | | | -- | | | | -- | | | -- | | | -- | | |

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| **Table 22: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rates, 2014–2017** | | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N**  **(2017)** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2017)** |
| African American/Black | 2 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 80.0 |
| Asian | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 94.1 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 3 | 33.3 | -- | 62.5 | -- | -- | 74.4 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hisp./Lat. | 1 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 85.2 |
| White | 76 | 71.3 | 79.3 | 74.5 | 78.9 | 7.6 | 92.6 |
| High needs | 53 | 58.0 | 68.9 | 64.9 | 64.2 | 6.2 | 80.0 |
| Economically Disadvantaged\* | 47 | 62.9 | 71.7 | 63.8 | 63.8 | 0.9 | 79.0 |
| SWD | 20 | 28.1 | 46.7 | 44.1 | 50.0 | 21.9 | 72.8 |
| EL | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 63.4 |
| All | 82 | 68.4 | 77.3 | 73.2 | 74.4 | 6.0 | 88.3 |
| \* Four-year cohort graduation rate for students from low-income families used for 2014 and 2015 rates. | | | | | | | |

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| **Table 23: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Five-Year Cohort Graduation Rates, 2013–2016** | | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N**  **(2016)** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2016)** |
| African American/Black | 4 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 83.4 |
| Asian | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 94.8 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 8 | 71.4 | 50.0 | -- | 62.5 | -8.9 | 76.8 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hisp./Lat. | 2 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 87.4 |
| White | 98 | 81.4 | 74.7 | 80.5 | 77.6 | -3.8 | 93.5 |
| High needs | 74 | 72.6 | 63.8 | 72.1 | 67.6 | -5.0 | 82.9 |
| Economically Disadvantaged\* | 69 | 73.4 | 69.4 | 75.5 | 66.7 | -6.7 | 82.1 |
| SWD | 34 | 57.1 | 37.5 | 50.0 | 50.0 | -7.1 | 76.5 |
| ELs | 2 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 70.9 |
| All | 112 | 80.0 | 72.6 | 79.5 | 75.9 | -4.1 | 89.8 |
| \* Four-year cohort graduation rate for students from low-income families used for 2013 and 2014 rates. | | | | | | | |

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| **Table 24: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **In-School Suspension Rates by Student Group, 2015–2018** | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2018)** |
| African American/Black | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 3.4 |
| Asian | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 0.6 |
| Hispanic or Latino | -- | 2.3 | -- | 3.9 | -- | 2.4 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 2.3 |
| White | 0.5 | 4.7 | 0.3 | 5.6 | 5.1 | 1.4 |
| High Needs | 0.8 | 5.9 | 0.4 | 6.3 | 5.5 | 2.7 |
| Economically disadvantaged\* | 0.8 | 6.1 | 0.3 | 6.4 | 5.6 | 2.9 |
| SWD | 0.9 | 7.6 | -- | 6.4 | 5.5 | 3.3 |
| EL | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 1.8 |
| All | 0.5 | 4.7 | 0.3 | 5.4 | 4.9 | 1.8 |

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| **Table 25: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Out-of-School Suspension Rates by Student Group, 2015–2018** | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2018)** |
| African American/Black | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 6.0 |
| Asian | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 0.7 |
| Hispanic or Latino | -- | 3.0 | -- | 3.9 | -- | 5.1 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 3.3 |
| White | 2.8 | 1.9 | 0.2 | 3.1 | 0.3 | 1.9 |
| High Needs | 3.8 | 2.6 | 0.3 | 4.2 | 0.4 | 4.6 |
| Economically disadvantaged\* | 3.4 | 2.5 | 0.3 | 4.2 | 0.8 | 5.4 |
| SWD | 6.1 | 5.1 | -- | 3.7 | -2.4 | 5.8 |
| EL | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 3.7 |
| All | 2.9 | 2.0 | 0.2 | 3.4 | 0.5 | 2.9 |

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| **Table 26: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Drop-out Rates by Student Group, 2014–2017** | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2017)** |
| African American/Black | 0.0 | 22.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 2.9 |
| Asian | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 0.6 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 0.0 | 0.0 | 5.9 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 4.2 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 0.0 | -- | -- | -- | -- | 1.7 |
| White | 1.4 | 4.9 | 3.4 | 3.2 | 1.8 | 1.1 |
| High Needs | 2.1 | 8.2 | 5.7 | 5.2 | 3.1 | 3.5 |
| Economically disadvantaged\* | 1.9 | 8.2 | 5.2 | 3.2 | 1.3 | 3.6 |
| SWD | 2.1 | 9.9 | 6.3 | 7.0 | 4.9 | 3.3 |
| EL | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 6.5 |
| All | 1.3 | 5.3 | 3.4 | 3.2 | 1.9 | 1.8 |
| \*Drop-out rates for students from low-income families used for 2014 rates. | | | | | | |

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| **Table 27: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Advanced Coursework Completion** | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2018)** | **2017** | **2018** | **Change** | **Target** |
| African American/Black | 4 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Asian | 1 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | 16 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 1 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| White | 152 | 57.1 | 49.3 | -7.8 | 62.2 |
| High Needs | 97 | 37.1 | 34.0 | -3.1 | 44.1 |
| Economically disadvantaged | 76 | 36.5 | 40.8 | 4.3 | 45.6 |
| SWD | 40 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| EL | 4 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| All | 174 | 54.4 | 50.0 | -4.4 | 59.0 |

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| **Table 28: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Progress toward Attaining English Language Proficiency** | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | **Non-high school** | | | | | **High school** | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2018)** | **2017** | **2018** | **Change** | **Target** | **N (2018)** | **2017** | **2018** | **Change** | **Target** |
| EL | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| All | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |

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| **Table 29: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**  **Chronic Absence Rates,\* 2017–2018** | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | **Non-high school** | | | | | **High school** | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2018)** | **2017** | **2018** | **Change** | **Target** | **N (2018)** | **2017** | **2018** | **Change** | **Target** |
| African American/Black | 13 | -- | -- | -- | -- | 11 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Asian | 9 | -- | -- | -- | -- | 3 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | 94 | -- | -- | -- | -- | 34 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Multi-Race, non-Hisp./Lat. | 39 | -- | -- | -- | -- | 8 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| White | 811 | 17.5 | 22.2 | -4.7 | 16.5 | 333 | 31.2 | 32.1 | -0.9 | 30.2 |
| High needs | 647 | 23.7 | 29.2 | -5.5 | 21.8 | 236 | 41.7 | 41.5 | 0.2 | 39.8 |
| Economically Disadvantaged | 479 | 24.4 | 31.1 | -6.7 | 21.8 | 167 | 45.5 | 48.5 | -3.0 | 42.9 |
| SWD | 276 |  |  |  |  | 100 |  |  |  |  |
| EL | 39 |  |  |  |  | 8 |  |  |  |  |
| All | 967 | 19.1 | 23.3 | -4.2 | 18.0 | 389 | 31.5 | 32.9 | -1.4 | 30.4 |
| \*The percentage of students absent 10 percent or more of their total number of days of membership in a school | | | | | | | | | | |

Leadership and Governance

***Contextual Background***

The school committee’s 10 members—3 from Royalston and 7 from Athol—meet monthly, and plan and develop strategy with the superintendent in 6 regularly convened subcommittees.[[3]](#footnote-3) School committee meetings routinely include presentations by a range of school and district leaders. While school committee members and administrators have constructive working relationships with the administrative and financial officials of both towns, district leaders and town officials expressed an interest in developing a closer set of working relationships and an improved level of communication between town and district leaders.

At the time of the onsite review in January 2019, the superintendent was in the middle of her second year in the district, having previously served as an assistant superintendent and principal responsible for leadership and turnaround efforts in two urban districts in Massachusetts. The superintendent seeks out the leadership of educators at all levels, brings school and districtwide teams together regularly, and delegates substantial responsibility to these teams.

Each school has an instructional leadership team (ILT) made up of teachers and administrators, which meets at least two times per month and bears responsibility for ensuring that the school improvement plan is being implemented. The districtwide instructional leadership team (DILT) numbers approximately 30 teachers and administrators, including the ILT of each school, as well as the directors of curriculum, early childhood, pupil services, technology, and English language learning. The purpose of the DILT is to set the “course for district improvement,” make mid-course corrections in pursuit of the district’s strategic goals, and ensure teacher voice in key deliberations and decision-making. In an unusual districtwide leadership assignment, assistant principals meet twice a month to lead district efforts in social-emotional learning and review the instruction of students with disabilities. Principals meet every other week with central office leaders to monitor schools’ progress toward strategic goals and leadership development. Twice each month, a districtwide curriculum team meets to review instruction, design professional development, ensure that teachers have adequate resources to support students, and oversee teacher coaching.

In addition to these team roles, many teachers serve in a variety of formal and informal leadership roles, often in a department or curricular area within their school. Three times per year, the superintendent spends time in each school, holding multiple school-based focus groups, to which all teachers are invited. In this way, the superintendent ensures that she is readily accessible to teachers, and they can make their concerns and ideas known. Teachers’ association leaders expressed their belief that they worked constructively with the superintendent, noting, as an example, the declining frequency of formal grievances. The superintendent, school leaders, and central office staff told the review team that the teachers’ association collaborates responsively and constructively.

The district has engaged a set of resource institutions to provide coaching, professional development, and capacity building to central office and school leaders. For example, DESE’s Statewide System of Support (SSoS) helps the Athol Community Elementary School implement new literacy, mathematics, and data collection and analysis initiatives. Professional consulting coaches and literacy and mathematics content and training providers work in all four schools with leaders and staff. The superintendent participates in the New Superintendent Induction Program,[[4]](#footnote-4) which she credits for helping her plan and implement key elements of her work. In addition to these academic and leadership supports, a rapidly growing set of partner organizations—a human services agency, a local hospital, a distance learning partner, and others—provide needed student supports, often engaged through the efforts of the superintendent or through the grant writing work of central office staff.

Leaders want to achieve and maintain a fast pace of change, in order to improve student performance and outcomes. The superintendent, school committee members, and central office leaders share a belief in the urgent need for change. They see it as a matter of opportunity and equity. As evidence for their conviction that large-scale change was needed, district leaders cited a history of low expectations, inequitable allocation of resources, low student academic performance on multiple measures, and chronic student absence, among other factors.

Leaders grapple with the limits of their capacity to accelerate change, because of the volume of work, because of the interrelatedness of the various projects. District leaders stated that because they have identified so many areas for improvement, and the volume of work needed to effect change was high, they were forced to choose among a range of needs to address, and establish a rank and sequence. Tackling some needs inevitably delayed action on others.

Another variable affecting improvement efforts is changes in personnel. At the time of the onsite review, three of the four principals were in their first full year of leading their school. One assistant principal and the Early Childhood Director at Athol Community Elementary School were new in 2018–2019. The assistant principal at Athol-Royalston Middle School was hired in 2017–2018. In addition, the superintendent and curriculum director, the top two instructional and curriculum leaders in the district, had been in their roles for fewer than three years. According to DESE data, between 2014 and 2018 the district’s teacher retention rate fluctuated from 89.3 percent in 2014 and 78.1 percent in 2015 to 84.6 percent in 2016 and 86.0 percent in 2018. While slightly lower than the 2018 state rate of 86.9 percent, the 2018 teacher retention rate appears relatively stable; nevertheless, multiple stakeholders reported a concern that teacher turnover was on the rise.

One of the challenges leaders face is to maintain a sense of collaboration and connection among staff, and to help teachers and administrators to manage the stress brought on by additional responsibilities necessitated by change. Teachers and administrators expressed concern that raised expectations of staff, increased stress, and the perception of high levels of administrator and teacher turnover were eroding the morale of educators, leaving the district vulnerable to additional losses of teachers and administrators. The superintendent and other district leaders expressed the hope that student performance and outcomes would begin to improve more rapidly, across schools and grade levels, and educators and students alike would feel a sense of accomplishment and an affirmation of the value of their efforts.

The district and its schools use their annual and long-term planning processes to drive the development, implementation, and modification of educational programs and practices. The 2018–2021 strategic plan includes clear goals and ambitious strategies for improving performance, opportunities, and outcomes for all students. The School Improvement Plans (SIPs) for the Royalston Community School and the middle and high schools, and the turnaround plan for the Athol Community Elementary School are based on current student data, with disaggregated data for students with disabilities. Each of these plans is closely aligned with the strategic plan. The superintendent, principals, and central office leaders all cited their frequent use of the district’s planning documents to guide their work and to enable them to assess progress.

Leaders at all district levels struggle to achieve a balance in their leadership. On the one hand, they continue to press for the large changes mapped out in their strategic and school improvement plans, asking for substantial efforts by the individuals and teams whom they supervise. On the other hand, they know that the success of students depends on the morale, skill, capacity, and resilience of teachers, who must be supported and engaged effectively as they go about the work of improving their planning, collaboration, and teaching practices.

Central office and school leaders reported feeling intense pressure to implement plans which, even if rapidly put in place, will take time to produce the desired results. For example, at the time of the onsite review in January 2019, the six-week data cycle, the six-week formative assessment system, and the districtwide data portal were all up and running, and they were designed to work together. However, many educators were learning the rudiments of these systems, and had not developed a mastery of their use in teaching. The evidence of effects of these systems on students, therefore, was limited.

District leaders also expressed a strong desire to provide the necessary support and encouragement to those who were implementing and experiencing the changes: the teachers. District leaders see firsthand how much stress these professionals work under.

District leaders make use of data from DESE, from normative referenced benchmark assessments, and from internal assessments, conduct their own analyses, and sometimes use disaggregated student data. They use this information to inform budget recommendations to the school committee that consistently address the goals and strategies of the district and school improvement plans. As part of the budget development practice of the district, the superintendent and the business manager work together to develop each budget. During annual budget development and throughout the school year, administrators review the cost‐effectiveness of programs, initiatives, and activities, referencing student data. The district is unusually flexible in its approach to annual budgeting, placing a premium on being nimbly responsive to performance and outcomes, and often initiating changes in spending based on new student outcomes data.

In its ongoing efforts to allocate its funding and other resources to effectively advance its improvement goals, the district often reallocates its resources. This can be a strength, as is discussed below, while also raising questions about other, possibly unintended consequences. For instance, the decision taken recently to combine the duties of the 9–12 curriculum director and the interim principal into a single j position at the high school enables the district to use the savings to fund after-school tutoring at the Athol Community Elementary School and the middle school. However, the decision may also lead to a level of demand on the individual, playing two major roles, that is not sustainable. In another case, the district hired a full-time math coach to serve both elementary schools, where MCAS assessment math scores were lower than ELA scores, using savings from the reassignment of the literacy coach, whose work was assumed by the curriculum director. It is too soon to assess the effect of this decision on literacy coaching or curriculum leadership. These decisions may well prove productive, but they each highlights the difficult trade-offs inherent in such action steps. As a frequent re-allocator of its resources, the district is in a position to learn from the effects of these kinds of efforts, both on the targeted reform receiving the added investment, and on the formerly funded work.

**Strength Finding**

**1. The superintendent, school committee members, and other district leaders concentrate on a small number of priority strategic objectives, work collaboratively and transparently to plan and develop policy, and regularly use student outcome data to monitor and support progress toward strategic goals.**

1. Interviews and a review of documents and videos of school committee meetings indicated that district leaders consistently used school committee meetings to address the district’s three priority strategic objectives: improving student literacy, addressing the social and emotional learning of students to improve student engagement, and making use of student data to inform, guide, and improve instruction.
2. The superintendent and school committee members told the review team that six subcommittees plan and develop policy with the superintendent in all key areas of work.[[5]](#footnote-5) Co-chairs of subcommittees develop expertise in their chosen areas, while members of subcommittees have a chance to work closely with the superintendent to raise questions, state concerns, and work out any differences.
3. The superintendent, school committee members, and school leaders have demonstrated a commitment to the use of data to drive improvement.
4. One of the goals that the superintendent has set for herself as a part of her educator evaluation plan focuses on the use of data to drive improvement and the inclusion of data in school committee meetings.
5. As a part of its planning, at the start of the 2018–2019 school year the school committee requested that the superintendent increase the frequency of data sharing on student outcomes at school committee meetings.
6. In the four school committee meetings held between October 2018 and January 2019, the superintendent, central office staff, and principals conducted seven presentations/discussions focused on teaching and learning. Each presentation included student outcomes data and documentation of progress toward school and strategic plan goals. These presentations/discussions made use of current and/or recent student data, including:
7. A detailed description of the district’s creation and population of its new data portal and a related exploration of the emerging technology needs of the district
8. Evidence of success in the reduction in special education sub-separate and out-of-class placements, and plans for expanded inclusion programming
9. Recent MCAS assessment results, showing widespread improvement, with an analysis of the significance of multiple data points, including data disaggregated by student populations (high needs, special education, etc.).
10. Detailed updates on the implementation of improvement/turnaround plans at the Athol Middle School, which was in turnaround status in the 2017–2018 school year, and the Athol Community Elementary School.
11. A detailed draft, including strategies based on student outcomes data, of the preliminary fiscal year 2020 budget.

**Impact**: By collaboratively addressing the district’s priority strategic objectives, planning and developing policy, and regularly using student outcomes data to monitor and support district progress, district leaders are working strategically to improve all students’ performance, opportunities, and outcomes.

1. **The superintendent, central office administrators, and school leaders use rapidly paced, nimble resource reallocation to enable educators to address students’ learning needs, soon after those needs have been identified. Some of these changes are driven by a commitment to equity. Administrators research and apply for government and private grants to provide additional resources and opportunities to support positive student outcomes.**
2. In her effort to use district funds in the most effective and efficient way, the superintendent focuses on what she calls “reconfiguration.” In her opening meeting with the district review team, the superintendent said, “Our goal, as we look at data, is to put supports in immediately, not wait till the end of the year.” The strategy of quick response is deliberate. This involves a continuous review of how and where the district is spending money and how staffing and expenses are aligned with academic and student needs, as determined by student outcomes and other data.
3. In her April 2018 budget presentation to the school committee for the proposed fiscal year 2019 operating budget, in response to data from a culture and climate survey, the superintendent outlined the need to hire a director of early childhood at Athol Community Elementary School. The new position would ensure expertise in the support of pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and grade 1 students. To pay for this new position, the district did not replace one teacher who left and discontinued stipends for lead teachers.
4. In 2017–2018, at the middle school, a review of the math performance of grade 5 students indicated that a cohort of approximately 30 students, across all classrooms, was struggling. With support from the central office, which facilitated personnel, financing, and logistics, a temporary after-school “academy” was formed for these students. The academy met for a half an hour a day for a period of several weeks and was led by the teacher in the school whose students had performed best on recent math testing. The superintendent said that the academy enabled the students to experience academic growth. In response to student outcome data that showed a significant number of students lagging, and using funding saved from a staffing reduction in the high school, the district created another after-school academy, similar to the one at the middle school, for students at the Athol Community Elementary School.
5. At the high school, the district used grant funding to develop a new position, the dean of dropout prevention and recovery.
6. After reviewing office data showing an increased number of visits to the nurse, two adjustment counselors were added to the staff at the Athol Community Elementary School. After an analysis of Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) data, administrators determined that in general, the high school’s experienced teachers were teaching the more skilled grade 10 students. The district decided to address this inequity by re-assigning the experienced teachers to those students who needed more support; district leaders told the team that the district saw improved outcomes for those students.
7. In her entry plan, the superintendent cited the inadequacy of funds allocated in the district budget for curriculum materials. Consequently, she included the purchase of textbooks and materials as a priority in her entry plan and in the strategic plan. As a result, curriculum materials were purchased in fiscal years 2018 and 2019 through additional budget allocation and by the re-allocation of existing funds.
   1. Literacy textbooks and materials were purchased for students in kindergarten through grade 5 in fiscal year 2018 and for students in grade 6 in fiscal year 2019.
   2. Math textbooks were purchased in fiscal 2019 for the high school.
   3. Science curriculum materials costing $75,000 were purchased in fiscal year 2019 with funds originally targeted for a debt interest payment. This was made possible when the district determined that the interest was not due until fiscal year 2020, thereby enabling the superintendent to target those funds for much-needed science curriculum materials.
8. District administrators pursue grant opportunities to support student performance, opportunities, and outcomes and re-allocate resources when necessary.
   * 1. To address the high dropout and retention rates at the high school,[[6]](#footnote-6) the superintendent applied for and the district was awarded a Title IV grant to develop and implement the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program. With these grant funds, the high school hired a dean of dropout prevention and recovery. The dean works with students, families, and with community service organizations to provide additional support to students and families. At the time of the onsite review in January 2019, the district planned to have the dean serve the entire district in 2019–2020.
     2. The superintendent told the team that the district recently received a grant from Heywood Hospital that would provide mental health services to high-school students via Skype and a clinic to be located in the Athol Community Elementary School.
     3. Total grant income in the district decreased in fiscal years 2018 and 2019. However, when the School Redesign Grant was reduced, paraprofessional and translator positions previously funded by the grant were re-allocated to the operating budget to maintain services.

**Impact**: Re-allocation of funding and staff enables school leaders and district leaders to respond quickly when students are struggling and to advance equity in students’ access to resources and opportunity. By using student outcomes data to determine a change in priorities, and acting immediately with a new or adjusted program or intervention, district leaders are accelerating the pace of change, enabling educators at all levels to be more responsive to the needs of struggling students, and establishing a culture of data-driven innovation and responsiveness to students’ learning needs.

Curriculum and Instruction

**Contextual Background**

Elementary classrooms use the *Engage NY* mathematics program and the *Wonders Balanced Literacy* program for English language arts. District leaders and teachers said that *Wonders* integrates some social science content. Elementary science instruction varies from school to school and grade to grade. Until the 2018–2019 school year, the district did not provide materials for science education. The district has adopted a *Keys to Literacy* approach that provides professional development (PD) for the teaching of reading and writing in all subjects across all grades. The district uses Atlas Rubicon as a curriculum management and storage tool. The team’s review of the contents of the Rubicon tool showed a wide variation, across grades and disciplines, in the degree to which teachers actively used or relied on this tool.

The district has drafted a guide that details the process of curriculum review and development. The guide includes a schedule of review and revision efforts from 2017–2022. The renewal effort is intended to align the district’s curricula with the state’s Curriculum Frameworks.

At the time of the onsite review in January 2019, team members found many curriculum- and instruction-related initiatives underway. There was a clear sense of urgency among the district’s leaders. The district’s initiatives are designed to have a positive impact on student engagement, student learning, and instruction. Multiple learning walks provide data about classroom instruction. Common formative assessments inform instruction and the strategic grouping of students. The district instructional leadership team and school-based instructional leadership teams analyze district and school data. Teachers use common planning time (CPT) by department and grade level to analyze common assessment and benchmark data and to plan adjustments to student groups and instruction.[[7]](#footnote-7) These initiatives fuel a cultural shift in the district’s schools.

Many of the district’s instructional leaders are relatively new to the district. The superintendent assumed leadership in July 2017, and three of the four school principals were new to the district or new to the position in the 2018–2019 school year.

A number of staff in the district contribute to the effort to improve teaching and learning. The curriculum director oversees all curriculum and data work pre-K–8. An academic coach supports and models math instruction at the elementary level. Lead teachers organize CPT activities for their grade level and are supervised by the curriculum director. The Title I coordinator helps implement the district’s 2018–2021 literacy plan, monitors data collection, and coordinates the efforts of teachers. At the high school, the principal is responsible for the grade 9–12 curriculum. Department chairs oversee CPT and the PD for staff working in their discipline. They observe teaching and manage the updating of curriculum maps for their subject area. The director of pupil services is responsible for providing PD to special education staff, supporting principals around special education topics, and overseeing the development of a guidance curriculum.

The district has made a strong commitment to the development and articulation of a vision for its work to improvement curriculum and instruction in literacy. The district’s 2018–2021 literacy plan is a detailed, data-rich planning document that lays out detailed data pinpointing the reading and writing challenges which students at all levels face. It also proposes a strategic approach that is both systemic and comprehensive and provides a set of concrete literacy-focused goals and objectives for leaders, teams, and schools to pursue over a three-year period, with clear and thorough use of SMART goals[[8]](#footnote-8) setting and accountability, and plans for sustainability of the work.

**Strength Findings**

**1. In observed classrooms, the review team found a generally high incidence of characteristics of high-quality instruction in elementary (K–4) and middle-grade (5–8) classrooms.**

1. **Focus Area #1: Learning Objectives & Expectations** In many observed elementary and middle- grade classes, teachers clearly explained lesson content and the importance of the learning objectives and conducted frequent checks for students’ understanding.
2. Teachers demonstrated sufficient and compelling evidence of knowledge of the subject matter (characteristic #1) in 89 percent of observed elementary classes and in 89 percent of middle-grade classrooms.
   1. In a grade 4 mathematics lesson, the teacher identified words likely to be new to students, e.g., “adjacent” and “protractor.” The teacher demonstrated what the students knew and would need to refer to in their work. In a grade 4 English language arts lesson, the teacher set up examples of verb to noun transitions (e.g., imitate to imitation) until students began to offer their own examples.
3. Observers noted sufficient and compelling evidence that the teacher ensured that students understand what they should be learning and why (characteristic #2) in 85 percent of observed elementary classes and in 77 percent of middle-grade classes.
   1. In a grade 7 English lesson, students were asked to read an article on the effects of sleep deprivation. The students’ groups were asked to create posters representing what they learned from the article. Each group was assigned a different question to research. Students were asked to answer their assigned question and to provide evidence for their answer.
   2. In a grade 6 science class, students were asked to compare and contrast characteristics of a plant cell and an animal cell using a Venn diagram. Students were asked to choose a partner and discuss the following questions: Why do you think plant cells have more organelles? What do we know about animal cells from yesterday’s lesson? Does anyone want to add to that or comment on that?

3. The review team observed sufficient and compelling evidence that the teacher used appropriate classroom activities well matched to learning objectives (characteristic #3) in 79 percent of observed elementary classes and in 82 percent of the middle-grade classes.

* + - * 1. In a kindergarten class, four students independently used a Chromebook app with a bowling game to practice subtraction; the teacher sat with one group using a hand puppet to help students practice sounds; a paraprofessional worked with a reading group; and a special needs teacher worked with students on vowels.
        2. In a grade 4 science lesson, the teacher used colliding balls to convey and discuss potential kinetic energy; the students were captivated. The students were invited to provide their own questions and to test the theory behind their questions.
        3. In a grade 5 mathematics lesson on number lines, subsequent to a lesson segment on real-world examples of number lines, the teacher passed out envelopes that contained a unique number line and an envelope containing real-world stories about a particular number line. Students were asked to match their number line with the corresponding story.

4. The review team found sufficient and compelling evidence that teachers were conducting frequent checks for student understanding, providing feedback, and adjusting instruction (characteristic #4) in 69 percent of elementary classrooms and in 58 percent of middle-grade classes.

a. In a grade 4 science lesson, the teacher used probes to help students fully articulate their observations and predictions about colliding balls. When the students seemed hesitant about their reasoning, the teacher demonstrated colliding balls again to give students another chance to observe and predict.

b. In a grade 5 science lesson, the teacher circulated among small groups asking questions and interacting with students, and stopped class to address a confusing issue raised by a student. The student explained the issue and the class discussed it. At the end of the lesson, the teacher used the “stoplight” format of formative assessment for students to indicate how well they understood the lesson.

i. Red: I have no clue what we were doing.

ii. Yellow: I think I know and understand it [the lesson].

iii. Green: I know it and can teach it to others.

* + 1. **Focus Area #2: Student Engagement & Higher-Order Thinking** In many observed elementary and middle-grade classes, reviewers found a high level of student engagement and many opportunities for students to be engaged in higher-order thinking and meaningful, real-world tasks.
  1. The review team found sufficient and compelling evidence of students assuming responsibility for their learning (characteristic #5) in 84 percent of observed elementary classes and in 76 percent of middle-grade classes.
     + - 1. In a grade 2 mathematics lesson on subtraction/equations, students worked with partners. All students were engaged, explaining their solution methods.
  2. In a grade 6 mathematics class, students working in groups were asked to solve equations using inverse operations. The teacher asked students to explain their solution rationale in writing.
     + 1. Observers found sufficient and compelling evidence of students engaged in higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, problem-solving, evaluation or application of new knowledge (characteristic #6) in 74 percent of elementary classes and in 77 percent of middle-grade classes.

a. In a grade 4 ELA class, students analyzed plot, mapped actions chronologically, shared their maps with other students, and then reordered their maps.

b. In a grade 8 ELA lesson, students developed and wrote claims and reasons for their claims, and evaluated classmates’ essays.

* + - 1. Team members saw sufficient and compelling evidence of students communicating their ideas and thinking with each other (characteristic #7) in 79 percent of observed elementary classes and in 71 percent of middle-grade classes. Student-to-student dialogue took place in partner work, in small groups, and through frequent turn-and-talk structures where students exchanged their thinking about content.
         1. In a grade 4 English language arts lesson on metaphors and similes, the teacher asked students to turn and talk 5 times during the 25-minute observation. The teacher asked the students to discuss whether the following examples were metaphors or similes: “The car is a rocket.” “My brother is like a tornado.” The teacher alerted the students that they would be writing exit tickets at the end of class to check for understanding.

b. In a grade 5 ELA class, students participated in a pair-and-share activity as they revised and edited their essays.

4. The review team found sufficient and compelling evidence of students engaged with meaningful, real-world tasks (characteristic #8) in 74 percent of elementary classes and in 59 percent of middle-grade classes.

a. In a grade 1 math class about subtraction, students practiced reading a clock and used dice to add different numbers to get to 10.

b. In a grade 7 ELA class, students read and wrote about how droughts affected biodiversity.

1. **Focus Area #3: Inclusive Practice & Classroom Culture** In observed elementary and middle- grade classes, inclusive practices were firmly established and classroom cultures were conducive to teaching and learning.
   * 1. The review team found sufficient and compelling evidence that the teacher ensured that students engaged in challenging tasks regardless of learning needs (characteristic #9) in 85 percent of observed elementary classes and in 65 percent of middle-grade classes.
        1. In a grade 4 ELA lesson, some students read the text online while listening to audio while other students worked with a co-teacher on word structure. Then all students watched a video and participated in a group discussion of what they had viewed.

b. In a grade 6 ELA class on irregular verbs, some students worked on close reading of a text, others worked on grammar, and some worked on reading /notetaking.

* + 1. The review team found sufficient and compelling evidence that teachers used a variety of instructional approaches (characteristic #10) in 100 percent of observed elementary classes and in 53 percent of middle-grade classes.
       1. In a grade 4-mathematics lesson, the teacher used whole-group discussion, turn and talk, and PowerPoint slides.

b. In a grade 8 ELA class, students participated in writing, revising, and group exercises editing their classmates’ essays.

* + 1. Observers saw sufficient and compelling evidence that class routines and positive supports were in place to ensure that students behaved appropriately (characteristic #11) in 100 percent of observed elementary classes and in 94 percent of middle-grade classrooms.
       1. In a grade 1 class, the teacher regularly praised students for preferred behavior rather than calling attention to negative behavior.

b. In a grade 5 science class, an observer noted “good climate and rapport” among teachers and students and students and students.

* + 1. The review team found sufficient and compelling evidence that classroom climate was conducive to learning (characteristic #12) in 89 percent of observed elementary classes and in 88 percent of middle-grade classrooms.

a. In a grade 1 math class, an observer saw lots of smiling and laughing.

b. A review team member noted that a grade 5 ELA lesson was well structured, and students orderly and purposeful.

**Impact**: In classrooms where teachers demonstrate knowledge of subject matter, students understand the importance of the lesson, instructional methods are aligned with learning objectives, and teachers regularly check for student understanding and adjust strategies accordingly, students are likely to succeed academically.

1. **The district has implemented a number of important districtwide initiatives to improve curriculum and instruction.**
2. The district has a district instructional leadership team (DILT) and school-based instructional leadership teams (ILTs).
3. The DILT, which includes the district’s administrators and all ILT members from each school, meets once every month throughout the school year. Its focus is “setting the course for district improvement.”
4. ILTs consist of teachers, administrators, and the principal, and meet twice per month. The ILT reviews school-level data to determine what instructional adjustments and resources students need.

a. After a DILT presentation of student performance data, the district’s school committee agreed to allocate funds for instructional coaching resources and the purchase of student texts.

**B.** The curriculum leadership team (CLT) meets two times per month to discuss needs around curriculum, instruction and assessment.

1. Teachers’ association representatives told the team that the DILT and ILTs provided teachers with opportunities to be involved in district improvement planning.

**C.** Common planning time (CPT) is scheduled weekly by grade level in the elementary schools and by content area in the middle grades. Some departments at the high school have CPT.

Teachers use CPT to monitor common assessment and benchmark data and to plan for necessary adjustments to student grouping and instruction.

Meetings during CPT use a district-designed tool called Data Conversation for Improving Student Learning and the Atlas Looking at Data Protocol to organize data analysis discussions.

**D.** Three times per year, a district-school team that includes the superintendent, the curriculum director, the pupil services director, the school principal, and a visiting principal from another school, conducts a learning walk in each school.

1. The team uses the “learning walk tool” a rubric created by district educators based on a review of best practices.

2. The tool focuses on unit design, lesson structure, adjustment to practice, student engagement, and literacy and rigor. The focus of the learning walk process is on the nature of curriculum and instruction across the school, trends over time, and goal-setting for the school, based on feedback.

3. Data generated from the learning walks are reviewed by principals and teachers in their respective schools, and at one of two monthly Instructional Leadership Team meetings. Outcomes may include identification of instructional trends and result in goals for the school, e.g., the need for professional development for special education instruction.

**E.** Twice a month, the superintendent conducts a schoolwide walkthrough that enables her to focus on the top priorities of the district. She uses a three-item tool based on the strategic plan, which concentrates on literacy skills, a tiered system of social-emotional and behavioral support, and the use of data-driven decision making in the areas of curriculum and instruction. She records her findings of strengths, and any other feedback, and reports it to the school leader.

**F.** The district’s curriculum and instruction leaders said that common formative assessments (CFAs) were developed in 2017–2018 to assess the rigor of instruction aligned with the district’s standards.

1. The locally developed common assessments in all subjects are administered every six weeks.
2. Teachers score the assessments and enter the data into the district’s data portal. Results are aggregated and reviewed during CPT and ILT meetings.
3. The review of the common assessment data has led to after-school MCAS assessment preparation and assisted in the focuses of the elementary WINN (What I Need Now) and middle schools’ Skills-Extension Block instructional intervention block.
4. Some teachers said the CFA data enabled them to make “real time adjustments in reading instruction.” Every six weeks Title I teachers use the CFA data to adjust instructional intervention groups. Some teachers said that they used the CFA data to drive interventions, adjust instruction, and decide whether to re-teach something.
5. The superintendent acknowledged that the CFA work required a lot from the district’s teachers but expressed the belief that the data helped them do a better job.

**Impact**: Instructional leadership teams, CPT, learning walks, and common formative assessments provide an infrastructure cultivating an improved teaching and learning culture.

**Challenges and Areas for Growth**

**In observed classrooms, review team members found a generally lower incidence of characteristics of effective instruction at the high school.**

1. **Focus Area #1: Learning Objectives & Expectations** In a majority of observed high-school classes, teachers did not match classroom activities with learning objectives in terms of both content and cognitive demand.
2. The review team observed sufficient and compelling evidence that the teacher demonstrated knowledge of the subject matter, explaining the lesson’s content with fluency (characteristic #1) in only 40 percent (33 percent, sufficient; 7 percent, compelling) of high-school classes.
3. In a high-school history class, the teacher provided students with a preview of review activities, but did not provide a conceptual framework. Observers found sufficient and compelling evidence that the teacher used appropriate classroom activities well matched to the learning objectives (characteristic #3) in only 27 percent (27 percent, sufficient; 0 percent, compelling) of high-school classes.
   1. In a grade 11, college prep English class designed to prepare students for a mid-term exam, the teacher limited questions exclusively to the recall of events and characters. The teacher missed the opportunity to increase the quality and depth of student understanding by asking about the nature of the problems faced by the characters.
4. **Focus Area #2: Student Engagement & Higher-Order Thinking** In a majority of observed high-school classrooms, review teams members observed limited evidence of engagement in classroom learning.
5. The review team found sufficient and compelling evidence of students assuming responsibility for their learning and being engaged in the lesson (characteristic #5) in 20 percent (20 percent, sufficient; 0 percent, compelling) of high-school classes.
   * + 1. In a grade 10 history class, the teacher read the mid-term exam review question and the teacher provided the answer. In a college prep English class, students responded to lower-order questions (what? & when?). The teacher did not challenge students with inference or interpretation questions.
6. The review team found sufficient and compelling evidence of students engaged in higher-order thinking skills—such as analysis, synthesis, problem-solving, evaluation or application of new knowledge (characteristic #6)—in only 13 percent (13 percent, sufficient; 0 percent compelling) of high-school classes.
   1. In a grade 12 science class, the teacher asked questions and posed fill-in-the-blank, one-word answers. Students responded. The teacher did not offer follow-up inquiry, explanation, or elaboration, and students did not demonstrate that they understood the material.
   2. Grade 10 history students played a game of definitions with simple right or wrong answers. Students did not elaborate on answers.
7. The review team did not find sufficient and compelling evidence (0 percent, sufficient; 0 percent, compelling) of students communicating their ideas and thinking with each other (characteristic #7) in high-school classes.
   1. In a grade 12 English class, students were asked to analyze a short story. Students shared their thinking with the teacher, with no student-to-student dialogue.
   2. In a grade 11 English class, only the teachers spoke; there was no student-to-student discussion.
8. Team members noted sufficient and compelling evidence that students engaged with meaningful real-world tasks connected to their lives or with the larger world (characteristic #8) in only 13 percent (13 percent, sufficient; 0 percent, compelling) of high-school classes.

a. In a high school math class, observers noted that the math lesson was abstract, did not bear a relationship to the real world, and “did not contain word problems that could show how computations related to or were used in life.”

1. **Focus Area # 3: Inclusive Practice & Classroom Culture** In observed high-school classes, inclusive practices were not consistently implemented nor was classroom culture found to be conducive to teaching and learning.
2. The review team found sufficient and compelling evidence that lessons were designed to support students’ varied learning needs (characteristic #9) in only 13 percent (13 percent, sufficient; 0 percent, compelling) of high-school classes.
   1. In a grade 12 science class preparing for the mid-term exam, the teacher did not provide differentiated support to prepare students for the exam.
3. The team found sufficient and compelling evidence that teachers used a variety of instructional approaches (characteristic #10) in only 13 percent (13 percent, sufficient; 0 percent, compelling) of high-school classes.
   * + 1. In a grade 12 English class, instruction was limited to the teacher asking questions and the students responding with answers.
       2. In an honors math class, the teacher solved problems at the white board asking questions as she proceeded through the problem. Students called out responses.
     1. The review team found sufficient and compelling evidence that classroom routines and positive supports were in place to ensure that students behave appropriately (characteristic #11) in only 27 percent of high-school classes.
        1. In a grade 12 mathematics class, students sat in groups of three and four and engaged in considerable off-topic conversation. One student has headphones on and two were focused on their cell phones.
        2. In a grade 11 history class, students were inattentive, focused on cell phones, and using earbuds. Many students were disengaged.
     2. The review team found sufficient and compelling evidence that classroom climate was conducive to teaching and learning (characteristic #12) in just 20 percent (13 percent, sufficient; 7 percent, compelling) of high-school classes.
        1. In a grade 10 history class, the observer found lots of commotion, off-task behaviors, and students calling out random responses that were unrelated to the questions. Exchanges in the classroom were not respectful.

**Impact**: Without providing effective student-centered instruction that challenges and supports all students and promotes student engagement and analysis, evaluation, and application of new knowledge, the district cannot optimize students’ learning experiences. When teachers do not use a range of instructional methods and the classroom culture is not conducive to teaching and learning, student interest and stimulation likely are diminished, and students are not adequately prepared for college, careers, and civic participation.

**Recommendations**

**1. The district should ensure that all teachers provide effective instruction that challenges and supports all students.**

1. The district should convene a representative group of teachers and instructional leaders (the DILT or a newly created group) to identify the district’s instructional strengths and challenges.

1. This group can reflect on the district’s learning walk data, tool, and processes; the superintendent’s walkthrough process; common formative assessment data; and this report’s Instructional Inventory (Appendix C).

2. Areas of focus should include engaging students in higher-order thinking, promoting meaningful discourse about content and students’ thinking, and supporting and challenging students regardless of learning needs.

3. The district should consider revising its planning documents to address the identified instructional challenges and should require teachers to consider these areas when they develop student learning or professional practice goals.

4. Professional development should focus on instructional areas that need strengthening as applied to the specific curricula that students and teachers work with every day.

1. The district is encouraged to continue to provide opportunities for educators to learn ideas and strategies for improving instruction.

1. Equitable opportunities should be provided by level for teachers to share best practices, with a particular emphasis on opportunities for co-teachers in inclusion classrooms and high-school educators to observe exemplary peers.

a. The district should consider looking into dual certification for general education teachers to earn qualifications in special education.

1. Teachers should receive appropriate guidance and feedback as they enhance instruction so that it challenges and supports all students.

1. Principals and other instructional leaders should ensure that teachers have the information and support necessary to strengthen identified areas of challenge.

2. The district should provide teachers with high-quality feedback that helps them to improve instruction.

**Benefits:** Implementing this recommendation will foster a deeper understanding of instructional strengths and challenges across the district, build a stronger culture of professional growth and improvement, and promote instruction is more clearly aligned with district priorities. In addition, the district likely will ensure that all teachers provide high-quality instruction that focuses on engaging and challenging tasks with measurable outcomes for all students.

**Recommended resources:**

* DESE’s *Learning Walkthrough Implementation Guide* ([www.doe.mass.edu/educators/title-iia/ImplementationGuide2016.pdf#search=%22Learning Walkthrough Implementation Guide%22](http://www.doe.mass.edu/educators/title-iia/ImplementationGuide2016.pdf#search=%22Learning Walkthrough Implementation Guide%22)) is a resource to support instructional leaders in establishing a *Learning Walkthrough* process in a school or district. It is designed to provide guidance to those working in an established culture of collaboration as well as those who are just beginning to observe classrooms and discuss teaching and learning in a focused and actionable manner. (The link above includes a presentation to introduce Learning Walkthroughs.)

Appendix 4, *Characteristics of Standards-Based Teaching and Learning: Continuum of Practice* (<http://www.mass.gov/edu/docs/ese/accountability/dart/walkthrough/continuum-practice.pdf>) is a framework that provides a common language or reference point for looking at teaching and learning.

* DESE’s *"What to Look For" Observation Guides* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/observation/>) describe what observers should expect to see in a classroom at a particular grade level in a specific subject area. This includes the knowledge and skills students should be learning and using (as reflected in state learning standards) and best practices related to classroom curriculum, instruction, and assessment for each subject area. The guides are not designed to replace any evaluation system or tools districts currently use, but are a resource to help classroom observers efficiently identify what teachers and students should be experiencing in specific subjects and grade levels.

Assessment

***Contextual Background***

Under the leadership of the superintendent, the district has embarked on an effort to transform itself to an organization that values data and uses it effectively to improve decision-making. As one of its three priority strategic objectives, the district has made a commitment “…to use data to drive decision making in the areas of curriculum, instruction, student learning and social emotional supports.” To achieve this, district leaders have developed research-based systems and practices for the collection, use, and sharing of data. The district’s assessment system includes MCAS, an external norm-referenced benchmark assessment given three times a year and a teacher-developed common formative assessment given every six weeks at all grade levels in core content areas. These new assessments provide a nuanced and balanced picture of growth and performance as well as actionable information to support decisions targeted at raising the quality of teaching, learning, and curriculum.

District leaders have worked closely with DESE’s Statewide System of Support (SSoS) consultants and other consultants to support professional learning districtwide. Although several consultants have worked in the district for a number of years to support the Athol Community Elementary School, they have recently expanded the nature, intensity, and reach of their work, at the request of the superintendent. Now, when SSoS staff provide professional development (PD) at the Athol Community Elementary School, the district also includes teachers from the Royalston Community School. SSoS have also included other school and district leaders in their PD on data analysis, especially for MCAS assessment analysis. Leaders, in turn, have been able to build teachers’ capacity.

District leaders model the collection and use of data to drive continuous improvement and as educators across the system engage with these many new data efforts, the district culture is becoming more data literate. While the district goal is for all leaders and teachers to use multiple sources of data to assess student learning, and to hold themselves and their students to high levels of accountability, many still struggle to meet district expectations about the use of data. At the time of the onsite review in January 2019, most data and assessment-related initiatives, while often well thought through, required continued capacity-building efforts to succeed.

**Strength Findings**

**1. The district is establishing a data-literate culture through the collection and review of multiple assessments and other outcome data and the use of data analysis to inform decision-making.**

**A.** Multiple formal and informal assessments, especially in ELA and math, provide a consistent and comprehensive picture of students’ progress and achievement. Student performance data provides actionable information for decision-making.

1. In grades 1–10, the district administers the NWEA (Northwest Evaluation Association) MAP[[9]](#footnote-9) assessments three times a year to provide benchmark data for reading and math. The district selected this norm-referenced assessment as an external measure of student learning, growth and skill development aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.
2. In addition to the usual classroom quizzes and tests, students take standards-based common formative assessments (CFAs) every six weeks in ELA and math at the elementary level, and in ELA, math, science, and social studies at the secondary level. CFAs assess students’ progress and mastery of standards and are designed to guide decisions on teaching and the curriculum.

a. Teacher teams developed the CFAs in 2017–2018 supported by DESE’s Statewide System of Support (SSoS) consultants and school and district leaders. CFAs are aligned across grades and courses.

b. Elementary teachers use CFAs to guide decision-making for general education, special education, and Title I programs. ESL teachers use CFAs in addition to ACCESS for ELLs[[10]](#footnote-10) to assess English learners’ learning needs and progress.

c. Teachers described using CFA results to know what to re-teach, select interventions, plan for co-teaching, group students for instruction, and set grade-level and student action plans.

3. Kindergarten teachers administer DIBELS Next three times a year and Gates-MacGinitie twice a year as norm-referenced diagnostic assessments to assess progress in reading, vocabulary, and comprehension skills and to help form flexible groups for instruction.

4. K–3 teachers use DIBELS Next to track progress of struggling readers. In addition, teachers administer a number of other diagnostic tests to elementary and middle-school students who are reading below grade level.

a. *Off Benchmark Assessment Flow Charts* for grades 2–3 and grades 4–8 guide the intervention process and assessment sequence for struggling readers in Title I programs.

5. Interviews with teachers and teacher leaders and classroom observations indicated the use of formative classroom assessments such as exit tickets, turn-and-talk, and “stop-light” to check students’ understanding.

6. District leaders and teachers told the team that teachers assessed the writing of students in elementary students using the *Wonders Writing Rubrics* and of students in high school using a rubric for writing that they apply across the curriculum, in ELA, math and science.

1. Interviews and a review of documents indicated that the district used data to inform initiatives supporting students’ social-emotional and behavioral needs.
2. The district uses data from DESE’s Views of Climate and Learning (VOCAL) student survey (from the 2018 MCAS assessment in grades 5, 8, and 10) to assess students’ perspectives on engagement, safety, and environment in their schools.
3. In 2018–2019, using funds from a 3-year DESE grant for Safe and Supportive Schools, the district is collecting PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) data as well as data about attendance, suspension, graduation, and dropout rates, and has a particular focus on the collection of attendance data in the 2018–2019 school year.
4. The district has developed a rubric and protocols to interpret qualitative data about social-emotional learning (SEL).
5. District and school leaders stated that they collected data from twice-a-month superintendent walkthroughs and three-times-a-year team-led learning walks to support improvement efforts.
6. In the 2017–18 school year, a team of educators from all levels of the school district developed the learning walk tool, a rubric for observers that tracks 10 indicators of effective teaching that are clustered in 5 areas: rigorous standards based content, well- structured curriculum, adjustments to practice, student engagement, and literacy and rigor. The rubric’s areas are aligned with the educator evaluation teacher rubric. The district has piloted the use of this tool across all schools in the 2018–2019 school year.
7. For the learning walk process, each school is partnered with another school—the two elementary schools are partners and the middle school and high school are partners. Three times a year, each school is visited by a team from its partner school[[11]](#footnote-11) along with district leaders; this team conducts a formal learning walk with six actions steps: focus, observe, compile data, review data, share observations, and make recommendations. District and school leaders noted that the district used learning walks to gather data to identify students’ learning needs and discern patterns in teaching and learning in the school, rather than to conduct teacher evaluation.
8. Principals also use the learning walk tool in their own classroom visits. Multiple principals observed that they prefer to use the tool as a way to focus in on one area of work, rather than attempting to survey for all the elements within the tool.
9. The superintendent conducts walkthroughs twice a month to collect trend data on how often lessons indicate evidence of the three priority strategic objectives: improving literacy skills, improving student engagement, and using data for improvement. She shares her feedback with central office leaders and principals.
10. District and school leaders use achievement data and other student outcomes data to set and monitor improvement goals and to allocate resources in the budget process.
11. Student outcomes data from the superintendent’s Entry Plan informed the district’s strategic plan. In addition, all School Improvement Plan (SIP) goals and the district’s strategic priorities and objectives provide data to periodically measure progress and inform mid-course revisions to practice. Data also informed the district’s 2018–2021 Literacy Plan.
12. School committee members and other district leaders said they now used data more often to set policy and allocate resources to support improvement.
    1. The superintendent initiated multiple action steps based on data analysis. For example, grade 4 math data and grade 7 ELA data prompted the addition of coaches. The superintendent ensured that sufficient funding was allocated for teacher-leaders at each school. Data on the number of visits to nurses justified adding a nurse and an adjustment counselor.
    2. Principals stated that the district focused resources on meeting school and district improvement goals and staffing needs. They cited examples such as targeting resources to after-school tutoring for struggling students; adding a dean of dropout prevention and recovery at the high school; expanding reading support at Athol Community Elementary School; increasing the curriculum budget; purchasing the *Wonders* program; and securing expanded curriculum materials, science texts, and computer carts.
    3. School committee members stated that they specifically designed the fiscal year 2019 budget to align with district and school committee goals for student achievement, and made use of data reports to approve improvement efforts in curriculum development and instruction.

**Impact:** When a district and its schools use multiple forms of assessment data and other data sources, leaders and teachers have the opportunity to access and analyze student performance, opportunities, and outcomes to improve teaching, learning, and the curriculum.

1. **District leaders have designed data analysis processes and a collaborative structure for groups of educators to meet regularly to use data to inform decision-making.**
2. Interviews and a document review indicated that the district has implemented a six-step data cycle that outlines a sequential, collaborative process for using data for improvement.

The administration of the new common formative assessments, given every six weeks, is aligned with the six-step data cycle.

To discuss data in various meeting formats, leaders and teachers plan an agenda, set meeting norms, use the *Atlas—Looking at Data Protocol* to guide the discussion, and consistently work to build collegial relationships.

District leaders and teachers noted that district leaders as well as external consultants from SSoS, NWEA (Northwest Evaluation Association), Keys to Literacy, Looney Associates, and coaches provided professional development (PD) to leaders and teachers to build capacity to analyze and use data.

* + - 1. Pre-K–8 leaders and teachers described their work analyzing data and using the data cycle for improvement.
      2. District leaders and teachers also stated that SSoS consultants provided a daylong PD session to district leaders to learn how to analyze MCAS assessment data by school and helped develop a new districtwide data portal to do so. Leaders, in turn, trained school-based teams.
      3. Leaders and teachers told the review team that all educators had easy access to all available data to support decision-making at all levels. However, teachers stated that access to and comfort in using data and the portal varied.
  1. Weekly common planning time (CPT) is scheduled by grade level at the elementary schools and by content area at the middle school. Some departments at the high school have CPT. Teacher leaders and department heads lead CPT meetings.[[12]](#footnote-12)
     1. Using the data cycle in CPT meetings, cohorts of teachers assess progress in meeting the three priority strategic objectives; analyze common assessment and benchmark data; and plan for instruction.[[13]](#footnote-13)
     2. To ensure that CPT data discussions are focused, participants use a district-designed tool, “Data Conversation for Improving Student Learning,” which has a specific protocol and suggested questions along with the *Atlas—Looking at Data Protocol*, which also guides discussions.
     3. For example, a November 2018 meeting of the grades 3–4 math CPT used the 6-step data cycle to review grade 3 common formative assessments (CFAs) and discussed trends in assessment data and action plans as well as what accounting for differences should look like in lessons.
  2. The Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) at each school, composed of school and teacher leaders, meets once or twice a month.
     1. Teachers told the review team that the ILTs reviewed each school’s progress and achievements as a whole, always guided by the strategic plan. By reviewing data and identifying needed resources, and working with specialists as needed, ILTs can reset and monitor improvement priorities and strategies at grade levels, in content areas, or for specific students.
        1. For example, a December 2018 meeting of the middle-school’s ILT focused on an update on the Student and Faculty Climate Surveys and planned a data presentation at the next District Instructional Leadership Team (DILT) meeting.

1. The superintendent and curriculum directors lead a monthly DILT meeting, which includes all 30 members of the four ILTs.

1. DILT members review CPT topics for kindergarten through grade 8 and for grades 9–12. They prepare a DILT agenda, supported by presentations of data analysis, which enable the DILT as a whole to align their discussion with the strategic plan.

2. The superintendent said that the DILT was a “throughline of building meetings.”

1. Other groups meet regularly to oversee the structures and systems that support the regular use of data to inform decision-making, all aligned to strategic priorities.

1. The principals and the directors of curriculum and special education meet every other week. District leaders and teachers described their work to support improvement efforts; assess what the data shows; identify strengths and challenges; and use DART data about comparative districts, including MCAS assessment results, to assess progress.

2. The curriculum group, led by the K–8 curriculum director, ensures that PD supports the strategic plan, including addressing staff needs to more effectively analyze and use data.

**Impact**: By using the data cycle and structuring a variety of leader and teacher groups that collaboratively analyze data at the student, classroom, school, and district levels, the district has made great strides in making data visible, accessible, and actionable in supporting its improvement efforts. As a result, the district encourages a sustained and shared responsibility and accountability for assessing performance and takes actions that likely lead to improved outcomes for all students.

**Challenges and Areas for Growth**

**The district has not provided sufficient support to build educators’ capacity to analyze and use data to improve teaching and learning. The district has not developed an effective way to share assessment results and students’ progress with families districtwide.**

1. Leaders and teachers stated that many teachers still felt challenged to use data appropriately; others did not have the required skill set to use data to guide improvement decisions, and to act on what the data was telling them.
2. A district leader noted that even through the district has provided professional development, not all teachers were knowledgeable and comfortable with new routines and practices for using data.
   1. With the recent movement to full inclusion at the high school, a number of teachers told the team that they were aware of what the data says about students who struggle academically or behaviorally, but they did not believe that they had the information, training, or steady communication with the central office needed to address these students’ needs.[[14]](#footnote-14)
   2. Other teachers said that they were now more aware of the needs of high-achieving students.
3. Although the district has documents, tools, time, and technology to support the collection, use, and sharing of data at the school and classroom levels, it does not have a data use guide or handbook to help teachers when they have questions or “get stuck.”

a. District leaders frequently provide data-related professional development, and central office staff often support a new or challenging effort at a school.

b. Teachers and administrators acknowledged that many educators were still learning basic data practices.

1. Teachers and leaders at the Royalston Community School cannot reliably access and analyze data because the school’s Internet connection is intermittent, given its rural location. Because of this intermittent connection, students at the Royalston Community School have difficulty taking the MCAS assessment online, and only can access online assessments and learning resources in small groups at any one time.
2. Some teachers at the elementary level stated the belief that the district overemphasized testing and data use, especially for its youngest students. They reported that some students cried and others were unsettled when asked yet another time to “fill in the bubbles.”
3. While most teachers appeared to find common planning time (CPT) and new data practices useful, for some, CPT was used to learn about data entry and conduct initial data management more than to use data to collaboratively plan for instruction or to improve the curriculum. Others said that they found the emphasis on data “overwhelming,” with insufficient CPT time to address struggling students’ needs.
4. High-school teachers said that the high-school schedule presented challenges in identifying time to convene some teachers for CPT.
   1. For example, some social studies teachers at the high school told the team that they did not have CPT and expressed the view that they received limited support to “address changes to the frameworks.”

b. Special education teachers districtwide do not have CPT; the superintendent noted that they would soon have CPT.

1. District leaders have not provided sufficient support for teachers to gain the skills needed to use disaggregated data to review trends, ensure equitable practices, and identify specific student groups’ learning needs, and to provide effective instruction that challenges and supports all students.

District leaders noted that they joined special education staff to review data for students with disabilities, and work with Title I staff to review data for economically disadvantaged students. The ESL teacher looks at data for English learners (ELs).

Teachers and administrators made it clear that the actual use of such data was uneven, and was less frequent and less reliable in the high school than at other levels. Although the proportion of Hispanic/Latino students in the district has grown in recent years,[[15]](#footnote-15) the district does not systematically analyze data from this student group to better understand and address their learning needs in general education.

The district has not disaggregated student data by gender in order to ensure that both boys and girls are supported and challenged, or to identify specific needs for these student groups. For example, in an observation of an AP U. S. History class, a review team member noted that there were 13 girls and 2 boys participating.

A number of teachers expressed the view that they did not have sufficient knowledge and skills to address the learning needs of specific student groups, especially at the high school.

1. Families and students receive uneven communication about and access to information about students’ progress toward attaining mastery in grade-level standards.

District leaders and teachers stated that K–4 report cards were standards-based. Report cards for grades 5–12 provide subject-based grades and comments that can be customized, but do not give information about progress related to the standards.

Only middle- and high-school teachers use X2, the district’s data portal, to post grades or other student or class information, and only families with access to email can access the portal. As a result, all elementary families and some middle- and high-school families do not have digital and remote access to their children’s data.

Although the elementary math program, *Engage NY*, has “parent-helping-student’“ resources to share with families, only some teachers send them home regularly. In addition, the district has yet begun to share similar *Wonders* resources with families.

The district has not developed a systematic process to share and discuss NWEA MAP results with students and families.

In its self-assessment submitted in advance of the onsite review, the district rated communication with students as “Not at All Well” described by the indicator “The district ensures that evidence of a student’s performance is shared with students in meaningful and appropriate ways.” This is the only item in the self-assessment for which the district gave itself a “Not at All Well” rating. Possible ratings are “Very Well,” “Well,” “Somewhat Well,” and “Not at All Well.”

**Impact**: Without all teachers having the skills and competencies to use data analysis well to inform their instructional decisions, the district cannot ensure that teachers provide high-quality instruction that challenges and supports all students. When families do not have access to information about their students’ progress toward attaining grade-level standards, the district cannot ensure that families understand how to support their children to perform at a high level.

**Recommendation**

1. **District leaders should build educators’ capacity to analyze and use data to improve teaching and learning and provide timely and effective information to families about their students’ progress toward attaining grade-level standards.**

**A.** The district should provide teachers with professional development about analyzing and using data to support and challenge all students.

**B.** The district should provide equitable opportunities by level for teachers to collaborate with colleagues in analyzing data.

The district’s first priority should be to allocate common planning time (CPT) for all teachers within each content area frequently and regularly to analyze data. During CPT at the high school, leaders should develop a system through which teachers can focus on collaborative problem-solving, by using and making meaning out of data, as opposed to entering data.

**C.** The district should convene a representative group of families and educators to gather input on ways to foster home-school connections and communication. This should include developing a practice of student achievement reporting that informs all families about students’ progress toward achieving mastery in grade-level standards.

1. The district should consider regularly sharing *Engage NY* and *Wonders* resources with families, as appropriate, across the district.

**D.** The district should ensure that educators at the Royalston Community School can reliably access the Internet and that students can seamlessly participate in online learning and testing.

**Benefits:** By implementing this recommendation, the district will likely improve teachers’ use of and comfort with data to identify appropriate instructional practices at all levels, generating a range of strategies for different student groups or individual students. This will help teachers better meet the diverse and evolving learning needs of Athol-Royalston’s students. Implementing this recommendation will likely ensure that parents understand students’ individual progress and know how to better support their children to achieve at higher levels.

**Recommended resources:**

* + - * The Framework for Assessing Teacher Collaboration in*Time Well Spent* (<http://www.timeandlearning.org/publications/timewellspent>) offers an in-depth examination of 30 expanded-time schools serving high-poverty populations with impressive track records of student success and demonstrates how these schools leverage their additional time in order to implement other critical reforms.
    - ESE’s *Assessment Literacy Self-Assessment and Gap Analysis Tool* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/ddm/webinar/PartI-GapAnalysis.pdf>) is intended to support districts in understanding where their educators fit overall on a continuum of assessment literacy. After determining where the district as a whole generally falls on the continuum, districts can determine potential next steps.
* *Parents’ Guides to Student* *Success* (<http://pta.org/parents/content.cfm?ItemNumber=2583>) are grade-specific guides from the National PTA (available in English and Spanish) with specific descriptions for parents of what children should be learning once Common Core standards are fully implemented, along with suggestions for helping students at home and communicating with teachers.
* *Family, School, and Community Partnership Fundamentals* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/boe/sac/parent/FSCPfundamentals.pdf>) provide a framework for family engagement, along with a self-assessment tool.
* Massachusetts Executive Office of Education’s *Parent Engagement and Family Support* web page (<http://www.mass.gov/edu/birth-grade-12/early-education-and-care/parent-and-family-support/>) provides links to resources for families related to education and learning, food and diet, and health and safety, as well as parent and family support publications.

Human Resources and Professional Development

***Contextual Background***

Highly effective educator evaluation and professional development (PD) systems typically act as linchpins of successful school improvement initiatives. This is particularly relevant in the case of the Athol-Royalston Regional School District, where high turnover rates among both teachers and administrators have slowed improvement efforts and have become a growing concern to district leaders (see the Curriculum and Instruction Contextual Background above). Evidence gained from this review indicates that the district recognizes the importance of these systems and has made deliberate efforts to enhance their effectiveness. This report identifies those aspects of the district’s educator evaluation and PD systems that still require significant attention.

**Strength Finding**

**1. The district demonstrates a genuine commitment to providing professional development that addresses district priorities, supports teachers’ growth, and is informed by student performance data and other data sources and assessments of instructional programs and practice.**

1. Interviews and a document review indicated that the district’s professional development (PD) program was aligned with the three goals articulated in the district’s strategic plan. The goals are designing classrooms where student literacy skills are the focus of daily instruction; creating a tiered system of social, emotional, and behavioral support; and using data to drive decision making in curriculum and instruction, student learning, and emotional supports.
   1. District leaders told the review team that these three goals were the focus of all the district’s 2018–2019 PD planning, programming, and supports.
   2. District and school leaders and teachers said that all school improvement plans and individual educator plans were generally aligned with the district’s three strategic goals and PD planning.
   3. Administrators stated that student data from multiple sources informed decisions about PD needs and programs. They said that the most relevant sources of information included MCAS assessments, MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) and NWEA (Northwest Evaluation Association) testing, district pre-K–12 common formative assessments, classroom walkthrough data for both general and special education analysis, and student attendance and dropout data.
2. The district provides structures and resources to promote adult learning and expanded opportunities for continuous and purposeful professional collaboration.
3. The district has built considerable time into its annual calendar to provide PD programs and activities for staff throughout the year. This includes four full in-service days and five early-release days designated for targeted PD work.
   1. In addition, regular collaborative time is embedded within the master schedules of each district school. All Pre-K–8 teachers are provided with weekly grade-level or department common planning time (CPT) meetings.
   2. At the high school, because of the complexities of the master schedule, CPT is only available to the mathematics, science, and English departments. At the time of the onsite, a newly formed committee, called for by the superintendent, was attempting to solve some difficult scheduling challenges to make room for CPT at the high school.
   3. District and school leaders and teachers said that each school also scheduled three after-school PD sessions every month. Each session last 80 minutes. They noted that these sessions enabled principals and school leaders to focus attention on unique school-based issues and topics while still working within the district’s well-defined PD guidelines.
      1. The district is expanding the use of coaching to provide timely, role-specific support for both teachers and principals. School leaders said that a district math coach focused her efforts at the Athol Community Elementary School and that the district provided services from outside consultants, including Looney Math, SSoS, and Keys to Literacy, to ELA and math teachers primarily at the Pre-K–8 levels. The district has assigned each principal a coach.
      2. The district has begun to focus attention on the PD needs of its paraprofessional staff. District and school leaders and teachers stated that the district recently established a paraprofessional PD steering committee, which includes paraprofessional representatives, to develop plans, programs, and services tailored to paraprofessionals’ specific needs.
      3. The district also endeavors to support individually pursued professional learning opportunities. Every teacher is entitled to one self-directed PD day annually, although the district does not reimburse teachers for this PD. Such days must be related to the district’s PD goals and must be approved by the principal.
      4. Interviews and a document review indicated that the district provided staff with numerous opportunities for individualized professional growth, including distributed leadership roles and membership on school and districtwide task forces,[[16]](#footnote-16) and periodic PD presentations to colleagues.

**Impact**: By providing substantial opportunities for teachers to collaborate in purposeful and structured ways, the district creates a culture of continuous professional learning and growth. It also promotes greater recognition of the shared responsibility among educators and educational leaders for students’ academic and personal achievement. By supporting teachers, the district likely will produce improvements in classroom instruction, professional competencies, the curriculum, and ultimately in enriched learning opportunities and increased educational outcomes for all students.

**Challenges and Areas for Growth**

1. **The district’s educator evaluation system does not prioritize opportunities for educators to receive high-quality feedback[[17]](#footnote-17) that helps them improve their practice.**
2. The team reviewed the evaluative documentation of 32 randomly selected teachers from across the district for the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years in TeachPoint, the district’s educator evaluation management system.

1. In general, all documentation, including goals, self-assessments, evidence, and formative assessments/evaluations and summative evaluations, was completed and submitted in a timely manner. However, the great majority of teachers’ formative assessments/evaluations and summative evaluations were not informative or instructive.[[18]](#footnote-18) They were missing high-quality feedback necessary to help improve professional competencies and classroom practice.

2. Only 16 of the 32 teachers’ evaluations were evidence based. Of those, most were minimally informative: the evidence cited was not specific or concrete, but rather, vague, generic, repeated on multiple evaluations, or a verbatim restatement of DESE indicators.

* 1. Teachers’ formative assessments/evaluations and summative evaluations rarely contained constructive feedback, specific pedagogical suggestions, or concrete, actionable recommendations for improved classroom practice or enhanced lesson design.
  2. Although some “Observation Feedback” documents[[19]](#footnote-19) offered meaningful feedback and actionable recommendations, most either did not contain suggestions or included feedback so general or unclear as to have limited value for improving classroom practice.

3. Teachers said that the quality of supervisory practices varied widely from school to school and even within schools. A number of teachers stated that they seldom saw their evaluator in their classroom and that the feedback that evaluators provided was not helpful.

**B.** The team also reviewedthe evaluative documentationof two principals.[[20]](#footnote-20)

1. In contrast to teachers’ evaluations, the written evaluations of school principals, which were done by the superintendent, were evidence based and growth oriented and contained specific recommendations intended to improve administrative capacity.

2. Supporting evaluative documentation for principals, including goals, self-assessments, and evidence folders, had not been entered into the TeachPoint system and were therefore not accessible for review by the team.

3. Administrators acknowledged that—because of the many competing demands on their time and attention and the large number of teachers assigned to each evaluator—they found it difficult to meet the minimum number of announced and unannounced classroom observations specified in the collective bargaining agreement.

4. Principals said that the district had not provided any formal or ongoing training, support, or targeted professional development to help administrators develop supervisory, evaluative, and calibration practices and skills designed to systematically improve instruction and have a positive impact on student learning.

**C.** Teachers and administrators stated that the promising learning walk supervisory model, introduced in the 2017–2018 school year, had nevertheless generated some confusion and misunderstanding among staff and had not consistently produced the positive outcomes intended.

1.Teachers expressed concerns about the purpose and scope of the process, the brief length of time spent in classrooms by learning walk teams, the wide range of elements and complexity of the learning walk tool, the composition of learning walk teams, and the inconsistent practices and procedures across the district.

**D.** As of the 2015–2016 school year, state educator evaluation regulations (603 CMR 35.07) call for districts to collect and use student feedback as evidence in the teacher evaluation process and staff feedback as evidence in the administrator evaluation process. This feedback may also be used to inform an educator’s self-assessment, goal setting, or as evidence to demonstrate growth over time.

1. School administrators said that the district has not taken any formal steps to use student and staff feedback in the educator evaluation process.

**E.** State educator evaluation regulations also require districts to develop student learning indicators as evidence in the educator evaluation process.[[21]](#footnote-21) When considering an educator’s impact on student learning, evaluators are to review results from multiple measures of student learning, including statewide assessments, common assessments, and classroom assessments, against pre-determined “anticipated student learning gains.”

School and district leaders stated that although the district has begun to make extensive use of common formative, summative, and benchmark assessments, academic data was used exclusively to identify and support student learning needs and not as evidence in the educator evaluation process.

2. School leaders said that they were unaware of any district plans to develop or incorporate student learning indicators as evidence in the educator evaluation process.

**Impact**: Without high-quality (specific, timely, and actionable) feedback, the district cannot systematically promote professional growth, improve instruction, and enhance students’ experiences and outcomes.

**3. The district’s professional development program does not have clearly articulated and measurable goals and objectives related to desired student outcomes.**

**A.** The Athol-Royalston Regional School District Professional Development Plan 2018–2019 lists the three goals from the district’s strategic plan and identifies the topics, dates, and locations of professional development (PD) meetings scheduled for the school year ahead. The plan does not contain comprehensive, detailed, and measurable PD goals or educator learning objectives. In addition, the plan is not presented in the form of SMART goals.[[22]](#footnote-22)

1. District leaders and teachers told the review team that insufficient attention was paid to collecting and analyzing educator data to identify and inform decisions about faculty PD needs, interests, and concerns. Teachers said that data from faculty interest surveys, assessments of individual PD presentations, and evaluations of the overall effectiveness of PD programming were not regularly or systematically compiled.

**B.** Administrators acknowledged that the district did not have a formally designated PD leadership group or committee. They stated that PD planning was done by the District Instructional Leadership Team (DILT), which is composed of central office administrators, principals, the special education coordinator, curriculum and pupil services directors, department heads, and lead teachers.

1. Teachers said that the district once had a designated committee to direct PD programming and that the committee included teacher representatives from across the district. They noted that the committee no longer existed. Some teachers told the team that they had little formal or direct ways to actively participate in district PD planning or implementation.

**C.** Teachers and administrators described the district’s induction and mentoring program as falling short of its mission to help attract and retain quality educators by providing them the targeted supports needed for their growth and development.

School and district leaders said that an absence of adequate funding was a major impediment to the program’s effectiveness. They said that no new faculty mentors have been trained for the three years before the onsite review in January 2019 and as a result the mentor pool, and program as a whole, was inadequate for district needs.

District leaders and teachers stated their belief that some new teachers have left the district because of the absence of structured and comprehensive professional supports and that this has contributed to the district’s high teacher turnover rate.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The superintendent also expressed concern about the district’s mentoring program. She said that the mentoring program may be “scrapped” in favor of an approach based on a more formal coaching model to support new staff, and noted that the issue was being studied.

**Impact**: Without a plan informed by student and educator data and district and educator goals, the district cannot ensure that educators at all stages of their careers receive appropriately targeted and differentiated professional development that improves their knowledge, skills, and ability to meet the learning needs of all students. Further, the absence of opportunities for teachers to formally participate in PD planning and leadership prevents them from becoming true partners in school and district improvement initiatives and in their own professional growth. Without providing teachers with the supports necessary for their professional growth and development, the district is challenged to attract and retain talented new educators.

**Recommendations**

**The district should promote educators’ growth by fully implementing all components of the educator evaluation system, with a particular emphasis on ensuring that all educators receive high-quality feedback.**

**A.** The district should support and monitor the skills and practices of evaluators to ensure that the feedback they provide is specific, timely, and actionable and relevant to instructional practice, professional growth and student outcomes.

Evaluators should participate in calibration training and other activities to ensure quality, accuracy, and consistency in the evaluation process.

**B.** The district should consider widening the pool of evaluators to provide teachers with more frequent classroom observations, increased support, and higher quality feedback. Allocating evaluative responsibilities to additional qualified personnel is a model of distributed leadership than can reduce or equalize supervisory workloads and build the leadership skills of more educators.

**C.** The district should identify and address concerns about its newly developed learning walk protocol, such as the current insistence on using it in its entirety rather than sampling from its dense variety of options. Consideration should be given to including teachers on the learning walk teams and ensuring that uniform practices and consistent procedures are employed in every school.

**D.** The district should implement systems to ensure that all educators develop student learning and professional practice goals that are SMART (Specific and Strategic; Measurable; Action-Oriented; Rigorous, Realistic, and Results-Focused; and Timed and Tracked).

1. Performance ratings for all educators should be based in part on educators’ impact on student learning.

**Benefits**: By implementing an educator evaluations system that prioritizes high-quality feedback, the district will help educators improve their practice. This will likely lead to increased student performance and outcomes. The inclusion of student and staff feedback and student learning indicators as evidence in the educator evaluation process will enable teachers and principals to reflect more accurately and comprehensively on their professional efficacy and more accurately identify areas of strength and areas for growth.

**Recommended resources:**

* + - * *A Protocol for developing S.M.A.R.T Goal Statements* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/>) is designed to support educators in developing S.M.A.R.T. goal statements using the appropriate evaluation rubric and a DESE-developed protocol. *The Evidence Collection Toolkit (*[*http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/*](http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/rubrics/)*)* is designed to help districts establish clear and consistent expectations for evidence collection and promote a meaningful process for the collection, analysis, and sharing of high-quality artifacts. The toolkit Includes: brief guidance, examples of district strategies, a worksheet for district decision-making, and a handout of Evidence Collection Tips for Educators.
* *On Track with Evaluator Capacity* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/pln/OnTrack-EvaluatorCapacity.pdf>) is an interactive document that provides specific strategies, lessons learned, and links to district-created resources. It was produced by eight districts that were part of a Professional Learning Network for Supporting Evaluator Capacity.
* *Quick Reference Guide: Opportunities to Streamline the Evaluation Process* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/QRG-Streamline.pdf>) is designed to help districts reflect on and continuously improve their evaluation systems:
  + What’s working? What are the bright spots?
  + How can we streamline the process to stay focused on professional growth and development?
  + What do we need to adjust to ensure our system is valuable to educators and students?
* DESE’s Educator Evaluation Training Workshops (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/training/teachers/default.html>) provide a general overview to the educator evaluation framework as well as opportunities to engage in activities associated with the first three steps of the 5-Step Cycle. This is a particularly helpful resource for educators new to the educator evaluation framework.
* DESE’s calibration platform (<http://www.ma-calibration.com/>) includes tasks and activities to help educators calibrate their understanding of both content and pedagogy.
* DESE’s Evaluator Calibration Training resources (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/calibration/>) include tools, protocols, and videos to support evaluator calibration around perceptions of practice aligned to ESE’s model rubrics as well as high quality feedback.
* *Quick Reference Guide: Student and Staff Feedback* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/QRG-Feedback.pdf>) provides information about how to select feedback instruments and use feedback as part of the educator evaluation system, along with links to relevant resources.
  + 1. **The district should develop a professional development program that is informed by data and includes measurable goals and objectives that are aligned with district, school, and educator goals.**

1. The district’s professional development (PD) plan should describe a set of learning experiences that is varied, systematic, informed by student and educator data, and aligned with district, school, and educator goals.

The district’s professional development (PD) plan should outline specific goals that include intended student outcomes as a result of PD, and changes in educator knowledge, skills, and/or practice.

a. The goals should be aligned with the district’s strategic plan.

b. PD should include teacher-led PD and job-embedded, content-based, and individually pursued learning, with structures for collaboration that enable teachers to improve implementation of standards-aligned curricula and instructional practice.

The program should address needs indicated by student achievement data, trends from classroom observations, and staff surveys. It should include goals focused on improving teachers’ practices and student outcomes in alignment with the district’s curricula.

3. The district should provide formal opportunities for teachers to participate in the design, implementation, and assessment of PD.

1. In alignment with DESE guidelines, the district should ensure that all beginning teachers and administrators receive the following induction and mentoring supports:

Beginning teachers should receive an orientation; assignment to a trained mentor within the first two weeks of teaching; assignment of a support team that shall consist of, but not be limited to, the mentor and an administrator qualified to evaluate teachers; and release time for the mentor and beginning teacher to engage in regular classroom observations and other mentoring activities.

**Benefits**: Implementing this recommendation will ensure that educators at all stages of their careers receive high-quality PD that improves their knowledge, skills, and ability to meet the learning needs of all students. Involving staff directly in the design, implementation, and assessment of PD programming will increase their sense of ownership and enhance their support and active participation in district and school improvement efforts, as well as their own professional growth. Through an improved induction and mentoring program the district will likely develop, support, and retain effective teachers.

**Recommended resources:**

* *The Massachusetts Standards for Professional Development* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/pd/standards.html>) describe, identify, and characterize what high quality learning experiences should look like for educators.
* DESE’s *Professional Development Self-Assessment Guidebook* (<http://www.mass.gov/edu/docs/ese/accountability/dsac/professional-development-self-assessment-guide.pdf>) provides tools for analyzing professional development offerings’ alignment with the Massachusetts Standards for Professional Development, the Educator Evaluation Framework, and the Standards and Indicators of Effective Practice.
* *Identifying Meaningful Professional Development* (<https://youtu.be/zhuFioO8GbQ>) is a video in which educators from three Massachusetts districts discuss the importance of targeted, meaningful professional development and the ways districts can use the evaluation process to identify the most effective PD supports for all educators.
* DESE’s Information for Professional Development Providers web page (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/pd/providers.html>) provides links to professional development course parameters and a self-assessment.
* Professional development case studies (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/pd/CaseStudies/>) highlight districts implementing meaningful professional development programs that support educators throughout the entire career continuum. They include examples of PD programs that are job-embedded, teacher-led, data-driven, and aligned to educator and district needs.

Student Support

***Contextual Background***

Many district students come to school each day with unique programmatic and support needs. In the 2017–2018 school year, 62 percent of students in the district were part of the high-needs student group because they were in one or more of the following student groups: economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and English learners (ELs) or former ELs, compared with 46.6 percent of statewide enrollment. Economically disadvantaged students made up 51.7 percent, compared with 32 percent statewide. Students with disabilities represented 27.1 percent,[[24]](#footnote-24) compared with 17.7 percent across the state. ELs made up 2.6 percent, compared with 10.2 percent statewide.

In addition, district demographics are changing. For example, according to DESE data the proportion of Hispanic/Latino students has fluctuated with an overall increase, from 5.1 percent in 2014 to 8.7 percent in 2018.

Between 2016 and 2018, the district’s student attendance rate, a key indicator of student engagement, decreased from 93.3 percent in 2016 to 92.2 percent in 2018, compared with the 2018 state rate of 94.6 percent. In addition, in 2018 the rate of students in the district absent 10 or more days per year was 51.5 percent, 21.4 percentage points more than the state rate of 34.1 percent. The 2018 chronic absence rate[[25]](#footnote-25) was 26.1 percent, 12.9 percentage points more than the state rate of 13.2 percent).

Chronic absence is high for all levels in the district and particularly high for grades 9–12. In 2018, the percentages of chronically absent students in the high-school grades were as follows: grade 9, 33.7 percent; grade 10, 32.6 percent; grade 11, 33.8 percent; and grade 12, 34.3 percent. In addition, the chronic absence rates for some student groups were high. In 2018, the student groups in the district with the highest chronic absence rates were as follows: 37.5 percent for Asian students, 36.3 percent for Hispanic/Latino students, 34.6 percent for students with disabilities, 35.1 percent for economically disadvantaged students, and 36.4 percent for English learners.

Athol-Royalston is rapidly tackling many substantive improvements to increase the engagement of all students. For example, the district’s strategic plan has prioritized the creation of a tiered system of supports to improve student engagement. The plan identifies several initiatives to create and implement tiered supports, assigns responsibilities for implementation to specific staff, and sets timelines for implementing each initiative. These supports address students’ academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs and development. Initial efforts to build a tiered system of support for students have progressed well. For example, the district works with community partners to provide and coordinate social-emotional interventions for students. These partners include Valuing our Children, which offers social supports to families, the PATCH Office, which centralizes services and outreach to parents, and CHART, which provides counseling on–site at schools. However, staff acknowledged that tiered systems of support would lead to improved student outcomes only when educators more effectively designed instruction that challenged and supported all students, offered high-quality inclusive instruction, and ramped up supports for vulnerable students. At the time of the onsite review, schools were in the rudimentary stages of making these changes. Interviews and observations by the review team indicated that work in these areas was of uneven quality. Although more program development and capacity building are needed, the planning for a tiered system of supports is thoughtful and holds promise for effectively supporting all students across the district.

The district has adopted a model for addressing the needs of students with disabilities through inclusion classrooms, which are co-taught by general education teachers and special education teachers. There is substantial expertise in the district: the superintendent, the director of pupil support, the special education coordinator, and some principals and assistant principals bring energy and deep knowledge to bear on the provision of special education services. Before the adoption of inclusion classrooms, the district followed a “pull-out” model in which students needing special education services were taught in sub-separate classrooms, spending much of the day away from peers in general education classrooms.

District leaders told the team that because the district did not have a consistent process for identifying district students needing special education services, some students received special education services when their needs were not among the special education service categories. Since 2018, efforts have been underway to improve the process for determining eligibility of district students for special education services; the proportion of students on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in the district dropped 1.3 percentage points between October 2017 and October 2018. According to DESE data, it is not likely that the district has disproportionate representation of racial/ethnic groups in special education as a result of inappropriate identification.

Adopting an inclusion model with co-teaching and improving identification of students for special education services can be seen as two efforts to correct inequitable practices of the past. However, at the time of the onsite review, general education teachers and special education teachers did not have experience co-teaching, and it was not clear to the review team that they had the information and support to do it effectively. Given the rapid pace of change initiatives in the district, the district has not been able to provide mentoring and professional development fast enough to help co-teachers do their work effectively.

District leaders stated they have not communicated effectively with families about services for students with disabilities and changes in services in 2018–2019. Parents expressed confusion and concern about the number of changes and the limited information about their children’s progress and about services for them.

District leaders reported that because of the three priority strategic objectives of the district’s strategic plan, steps to implement improvements to special education services were put on hold until recently. For example, a special education coordinator was hired in November 2018, enabling a clearer delineation of the responsibilities of the coordinator, the director of pupil services, school principals, and assistant principals. At the time of the onsite review in January 2019, a Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (SEPAC) had recently been formed.

**Challenges and Areas for Growth**

**1. The district has launched initiatives to improve student engagement. The district has not sufficiently supported teachers in implementing these initiatives.**

1. In 2017–2018, the district adopted an inclusion model of instruction and established co-taught classrooms (special education teachers and general education content teachers) to ensure that students with disabilities needing direct supports and materials received them in the least restrictive environment.

1. The superintendent reported that in the 2017–2018 school year 80–85 percent of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) were in substantially separate classrooms rather than in inclusion classrooms. In 2018–2019, 80–85 percent of students with IEPs were in inclusion classrooms.[[26]](#footnote-26)

2. According to DESE data, between 2014 and 2018, the proportion of students identified as students with disabilities has hovered between 26 percent and 27 percent. In 2017–2018, the proportion of students with disabilities was 27.1 percent, compared with the 2018 state rate of 17.7 percent.

**B.** District leaders stated that general education teachers and special education teachers were still adjusting to being responsible for providing effective instruction to a wider diversity of students in the inclusion classrooms. This is a result of the district’s efforts to include more students in general education classes, which is requiring adjustments in practice.

1. District leaders reported that some special education teachers were in the process of transitioning to co-teaching in inclusion classrooms, from the smaller sub-separate settings that they were used to.
2. Some teachers expressed concern about co-teaching, noting that they were “not sure” how to support students in inclusion classrooms without the pull-out and sub-separate programming that existed in the past. These teachers noted that they did not have a clear set of co-teaching expectations and practices to follow.

3. High-school teachers stated that special education teachers did not have scheduled common planning time to meet with their co-teacher and to meet with other special education teachers. In addition, special education teachers were often pulled from the classroom, in some instances to cover the classes of other content teachers’ common planning time.

4. District leaders reported that effective professional development and personalized coaching for special education teachers were needed.

a. Interviewees reported that a review of current IEPs indicated that some special education teachers need extensive supports to build their capacity to provide accurate selection of accommodations per need in inclusion classrooms.

5. In its self-assessment submitted in advance of the onsite, the district rated classroom instruction as “Somewhat Well” described by the indicator: “Classroom climate and structures support all students to learn collaboratively, take academic risks, and take ownership of their learning.” Possible ratings are “Very Well,” “Well,” “Somewhat Well,” and “Not at All Well.”

**C.** In 2018–2019, a tiered system of social-emotional and behavioral supports is a priority strategic objective.

1. In 2018, the district updated the district curriculum accommodation plan (DCAP), which provides guidelines to meet the needs of diverse learners in the general education classroom.

2. The superintendent told the review team that implementing social-emotional and behavioral strategies was still new for teachers and not likely to be evident in observed classrooms in the district.

3. In observed classrooms, team members found sufficient and compelling evidence of classroom routines and positive supports in place to ensure students behave appropriately (characteristic #11) in only 27 percent of observed high school classrooms, and sufficient and compelling evidence of classrooms with climate conducive to teaching and learning (characteristic #12) in only 20 percent of observed high school classes.

1. In contrast, observers found sufficient and compelling evidence of classroom routines and positive supports in place to ensure students behave appropriately in 100 percent of observed elementary classes and in 94 percent of middle school classrooms. Team members saw sufficient and compelling evidence of classrooms with climate conducive to teaching and learning in 88 percent of observed middle school classes.

**Impact**: Rapid transformation of the supports for students with disabilities, from a continuum of supports to inclusion classrooms, means that some teachers are unprepared to provide what students need.

**Recommendation**

**The district should ensure that it sufficiently supports teachers in implementing its initiatives to increase student engagement.**

See the Curriculum and Instruction recommendation above.

Financial and Asset Management

***Contextual Background***

The regional district has consistently exceeded required net school spending (NSS) since fiscal year 2008 by percentages ranging from 1.9 percent in fiscal year 2014 to 9.0 percent in fiscal year 2011, with a decrease between 2011 and 2018. District administrators do not budget to meet or exceed NSS because of their confidence that they will continue to meet or exceed the required level of spending. Town officials expressed support for the district but also said their ability to increase their level of financial support was limited because of financial constraints. The district has a certified Excess & Deficiency account of $666,459 as of June 30, 2018, and a significant balance of $1,695,301 in its school choice revolving account. Administrators view these two accounts as emergency funds although they are available for operating funds, particularly the school choice revolving account to which any operating expense can be charged throughout the year.

Through its long-range capital plan, which describes capital development and improvement needs, the district has also supported the district’s capital needs. The plan is reviewed and revised as needed with input from appropriate stakeholders. The district also has a formal preventative facilities maintenance plan to prolong the effective life of the district’s capital assets. At the time of the onsite review in January 2018, the district was replacing the high school’s roof and installing new windows and boilers.[[27]](#footnote-27) During visits to the high school to conduct interviews and classroom observations, review team members observed the following: cabinets in classrooms with missing doors or hanging from broken hinges; science labs with inadequate equipment; classrooms and bathrooms that needed cleaning; much out-of-date technology in classrooms; and worn floors and carpeting. During the onsite visit, the back-up boiler at the high school stopped working and all classes had to be cancelled mid-morning. Foundation enrollment, the number of school-aged children in the member towns, has increased slightly in recent years[[28]](#footnote-28) as has Chapter 70 aid (see Table B3 in Appendix B). In addition, the number of students using the school choice option to enroll in other districts has increased steadily (see Table 30 below). From 2014 to 2018, the enrollment of students in the district has increased by 4.4 percent, from 1,437 in 2014 to 1,500 in 2018. From 2014 to 2017, in-district per-pupil expenditures have risen from $13,967 in 2014 to $14,426 in 2017 (latest available data). In addition, from 2014 to 2017, total out-of-district expenditures increased from $4,053,400 to $4,621,679 in 2017 (latest available data).

Athol’s population, at 11,584, is over eight times that of Royalston, at 1,307. The superintendent and town officials told the team that the regional agreement was working well for the district and the two member towns.

Between 2015 and 2018, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in the district has fluctuated with an overall increase, from 43.7 percent in 2015 to 50.7 percent in 2018, compared with 32 percent statewide. The high proportion of economically disadvantaged students in the district is indicative of the economic condition of the regional district, particularly of Athol. Athol is located in a rural area of the state but has an industrial heritage, with the primary employer being Starrett Tool, founded in 1880. Many interviewees said that the town considered itself geographically isolated; many attributed the difficulty in improving its economic condition to this isolation. However, town officials and residents are optimistic about some recent economic developments. A new plaza was recently built with restaurants, a cinema, and a large grocery store. Heywood Hospital is expanding and the town will soon be the site of an approved marijuana growing facility, to be located in an empty industrial building.

In 2006, the regional district came under state fiscal oversight and was required to secure a $1,000,000 loan to improve its financial position. The district is still required to maintain a Reserve Fund to Ensure Fiscal Stability in an amount determined by the Department of Revenue (DOR). At the time of the onsite in January 2019, the account balance was $353,120. The DOR requires the district to make small annual contributions to the account. District administrators did not know whether—or when—they would be able to access those funds, but the regional district remained in compliance with the DOR requirement.

**Strength Finding**

1. **District and town leaders have demonstrated their commitment to improving and maintaining school buildings and systems through comprehensive planning and investments in new school buildings.**
2. The district’s full-time facilities director is responsible for capital planning, building and equipment maintenance, and transportation.
3. The facilities director has worked in the district for 35 years, first as a custodian and then 16 years as director.
4. The director supervises 10 full-time custodians who are employees of the district.
5. The facilities director works with the bus vendor to design bus routes and takes calls from the vendor and families about daily transportation.

**B.** The district has a current and comprehensive five-year capital plan that is regularly reviewed by the superintendent, principals, and town officials.

The 2019–2023 capital plan is an Excel Workbook with a tab for each of the four schools. Each worksheet in the workbook contains a description of the facilities or equipment, the location, date built or acquired, original cost, estimated replacement cost, condition, financing of override or debt exclusion, and schedule to undertake work or request funding.

1. Examples of work proposed for fiscal year 2019 include the repair of the high-school concession stand, purchase of a dishwasher for the high school, and purchase of a lawn tractor for the middle school.

**C.** The district also has a comprehensive Facilities Maintenance Plan dated 2017–2020 to be used by the custodial staff at each school. The plan outlines daily, weekly, monthly, and semi-annual tasks both inside and outside of schools.

**D.** The district has three relatively new school buildings that are in excellent condition. At the time of the onsite review in January 2019, the district was making some renovations at the high school.

1. The district has four school buildings, which it has built or renovated since 1996.
2. The Athol Community Elementary School is new construction; it opened in fiscal year 2017. The town of Athol owns the school building.
3. The Royalston Community School was built in 1996. The town of Royalston owns the school building.
4. The Athol-Royalston Middle School was built in 1999. The regional school district owns the school building.
5. Athol High School was built in 1957–1958. Current projects include a roof replacement as well as the installation of new windows and boilers. All of these projects are primarily funded by the Accelerated Repair Program through the Massachusetts School Building Authority with a portion paid for by the two member towns. The regional school district owns the school building.
6. In addition to approving debt for the construction of the Athol Community Elementary School by the town of Athol and for their share of the renovations at the high school, the two member towns of Athol and Royalston continue to support capital improvements at the district schools through a commitment to fund the capital maintenance fund with $150,000 per year.

With the towns’ commitment to fund additional capital improvements, the district was able to renovate the high-school locker rooms, hallways, restrooms, and auditorium in fiscal years 2017 and 2018.

**Impact**: The district’s commitment to improving and maintaining school buildings contributes to enhanced educational opportunities and outcomes for its students.

**Challenges and Areas for Growth**

**The district is facing high numbers of students who are choosing to enroll in other districts.**

1. Between 2014 and 2018, the net loss of students to other districts and to a charter school has increased. The number of students choosing to use the school choice option to enroll in other districts has exceeded the number of out-of-district students choosing to enroll in Athol-Royalston schools.

According to DESE school choice trend data, the number of students that Athol-Royalston sent to other districts has increased 5.3 percent in the last five years (See Table 30 below); 353 students enrolled in other districts in 2018. Tuition costs for these students have increased in the last five years (see Table 31 below), and were $2,225,965 in 2018.

The number of students from other towns choosing to enroll in Athol-Royalston has increased in the last five years (see Table 30 below); 65 such students enrolled in the district in 2018. Tuition revenue for these students has increased in the last five years (see Table 31), and was $400,652 in 2018.

Over the last five years, the number of students leaving the district to enroll in a local charter school has remained relatively stable, along with associated tuition expenses (see Tables 30 and 31 below); 1 student enrolled in a local charter school in 2018.

Between 2014 and 2018, the net loss of students decreased from 297 in 2014 to 288 in 2018, a decrease of 3 percent, and the district’s net tuition expenses increased by 3.95 percent.

**Table 30: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**

**Number of FTE Students Enrolling in the District and in Other Districts,\* 2014–2018**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **Choice Out** | -335.3 | -359.9 | -364.5 | -358.8 | -353.1 |
| **Charter School Out** | -1.5 | -1.0 | -5.0 | -2.5 | -1.0 |
| **Choice In** | +39.1 | +58.0 | +66.1 | +73.0 | +65.5 |
| **Net Out vs. In** | -297.7 | -302.9 | -303.4 | -288.3 | -288.6 |

**Table 31: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**

**School Choice and Charter Tuition Expenses and Receipts,\* 2014–2018**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |  |
| **Choice Out Tuition** |  | -$1,972,250 | -$2,137,402 | -$2,243,909 | -$2,264,187 | -$2,225,965 |  |
| **Charter School Tuition** |  | -$11,684 | -$9,852 | -$53,763 | -$32,891 | -$11,540 |  |
| **Charter School Reim-bursement** |  | +$1,037 | +886 | +40,245 | +2,218 | +890 |  |
| **Choice In Tuition** |  | +$216,746 | +$372,175 | +$386,650 | +$431,393 | +$400,652 |  |
| **Net Out vs. In** |  | -$1,766,151 | -$1,774,193 | -$1,870,777 | -$1,863,467 | -$1,835,963 |  |

1. The review team found limited evidence of concern about the number of students enrolling in other districts, or of a strategy to address the issue.
2. Interviewees shared a range of possible explanations as to why students choose to enroll elsewhere. Some district leaders stated that the district received negative press in the past, that not enough programs were offered in the district, particularly at the secondary level, and noted perceptions that classroom management and leadership were missing and that the school buildings were old and not “user-friendly.”

2. The “choice-out” issue does not appear in the district’s strategic plan, School Improvement Plans, or the superintendent’s entry plan under “Priorities FY19” or “Budget Barriers.”

3. The superintendent expressed concern about the issue of students enrolling in other districts but conveyed her belief that it could not be strategically addressed until the number and quality of programs in the district were improved.

4. A recommendation was made in the 2013 NEASC report to create a task force to study and address the financial ramifications of school choice. Review team members did not find evidence that this recommendation was followed.

**Impact**: With high numbers of students “choicing out,” the district faces continued pressure on planning and budgeting.

**The district’s budget documents are not clear, comprehensive, and easily accessible by all constituents.**

1. During the budget development and approval process, district administrators share a 23-page document[[29]](#footnote-29) printed from the accounting system that includes two years of actual expenses, the current-year approved budget, and the proposed budget.
2. The description column of the account line runs off the document page and does not provide a clear explanation of the budget line.

2. The primary document does not contain a narrative about district goals and priorities.

3. The primary document does not include all available funds, including grants and revolving accounts.

4. Although school committee members receive a budget vs. actual report that includes grant and revolving expenses at intervals during the fiscal year, those account balances, anticipated revenue, and planned expenses from those accounts are not provided to all stakeholders during the budget development and approval process.

* 1. A district administrator told the review team that the district did not have formal budgets or spending plans for either grants or revolving accounts.

**B.** The superintendent prepares an eight-slide PowerPoint budget presentation.

1. The presentation includes a four-year history of spending and student enrollment, dollar amounts for some alternative sources of revenue and special education costs, and narrative on new initiatives.

2. The superintendent’s presentation is the only document given to town meeting attendees.

3. It was not clear to the review team whether the district shared this presentation with town officials.

**C.** A one-page document called “Budget Assessment Sheet” for fiscal year 2018 (dated 3/27/17) was provided to the review team. The team did not find evidence of a document that includes more recent information on sources of revenue and the calculation of each member town’s assessment.

**D.** The district’s website contains limited financial information.

1. The district’s website does not include historical/proposed budgets or district audit reports, the 2019–2023 capital improvement plan, or contact information for the business office.

2. The district’s website contains two documents related to the financial operations of the district: a 21-page fiscal year 2019 budget report from the accounting system and a 47-page document titled “FY18 Budget Proposal.”

**Impact**: Without including historical data, summary or narratives, and a clear link to district goals or priorities in budget documents, the district cannot ensure a transparent budget process and effective use of funds to supports all students’ needs.

**Recommendations**

* 1. **District leaders and town officials should continue to work strategically and collaboratively to improve all students’ performance, opportunities, and outcomes.**

1. District and school leaders should continue to establish, implement, and evaluate policies, procedures, systems, and budgets with a primary focus on achieving districtwide improvement goals, in part through equitable and effective use of resources.
2. The district should take decisive and collaborative action to prepare projections of enrollment, expenditures, and revenue for the next five years.
3. The district should develop a plan to publicize the recent changes in the district and school leadership and highlight positive accomplishments in the district.

A priority of the plan should be a concerted outreach to local press.

The district should invite local newspaper reporters to events where student and school achievements are being recognized. In addition, the district should send press releases highlighting positive accomplishments in the district.

1. The district might consider developing programs or activities that other local districts do not offer as a way of distinguishing the district in the competitive landscape.
   * 1. The district might consider before-school or more after-school programs or unique electives at the high school. In addition, the district might consider adding athletic and other co-curricular programs and activities at the high school.
     2. The district might consider developing high-quality in-district special education programs that would enable students being sent to programs outside the district to return to classes and programs in the district. These programs might also attract out-of-district students.

**Benefits:** By implementing this recommendation, the district and the member towns will continue to promote joint responsibility for students’ opportunities and outcomes, build a strong sense of support for the district’s schools, and ensure that the district and the towns are effectively supporting district priorities.

**Recommended resources:**

* *At-A-Glance Community Reports* (<https://www.mass.gov/service-details/at-a-glance-and-community-comparison-reports>) are community-specific overviews of key data from the Department of Revenue, including socioeconomic data, cherry sheet data, tax revenue information, and other data.
* ESE’s *School Finance Statistical Comparisons* web page (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/statistics/>) provides comparisons of per-pupil expenditure, long-term enrollment, teacher salaries, and special education direct expenditure trends.
* *Shifting Resources Strategically to Fund District Priorities* (<https://dmgroupk12.com/solutions/strategic-budgeting>) describes how to reallocate existing funds to support key strategic efforts in three key areas: general education staffing levels, special education services, and federal funds such as Title I, II, and III. It also lists “Ten Mistakes to Avoid” and a list of reflection questions to guide districts’ reallocation.
* *Transforming School Funding: A Guide to Implementing Student-Based Budgeting* (<https://www.erstrategies.org/cms/files/2752-student-based-budgeting-guide.pdf>), from Education Resource Strategies, describes a process to help districts tie funding to specific student needs.
* In *Spending Money Wisely: Getting the Most from School District Budgets* (<https://dmgroupk12.com/> ; scroll down to Research section), authors Nathan Levenson, Karla Baehr, James C. Smith, and Claire Sullivan identify and discuss the top ten opportunities for districts to realign resources and free up funds to support strategic priorities. Drawing on the wisdom of leading thinkers, district leaders, and education researchers from across the country, the authors gathered a long list of opportunities for resource reallocation. To distill these down to the ten most high-impact opportunities, each opportunity was assessed based on its financial benefit, its impact on student achievement, its political feasibility, and its likelihood of success relative to the complexity of implementation.
* *Smarter School Spending for Student Success* (<http://smarterschoolspending.org/>) provides free processes and tools to help districts use their resources to improve student achievement.

**2. The district should develop a budget document that is clear, comprehensive, and details how the budget supports district and school goals and priorities, how much schools and programs cost, and how outside funds are used.**

1. The district should create a budget document that contains all essential information about the financial operations of the district.

All funding sources should be included with detailed spending plans.

1. Historical budgets as well as current and proposed budgets, as well as other essential information about the district’s financial operations should be available on the district’s website.

**Benefits:** By implementing this recommendation, the district will have a comprehensive budget document that clearly presents the district’s education efforts. In addition, the budget document and the process used to create it will inform budget development and likely improve understanding and create trust and confidence among stakeholders that the public’s funds are being soundly used to support the needs of the district’s students.

**Recommended resources:**

* The Rennie Center’s *Smart* *School Budgeting* (<http://www.renniecenter.org/sites/default/files/2017-01/SmartSchoolBudgeting.pdf> ) is a summary of existing resources on school finance, budgeting, and real­location.
* *Best Practices in School District Budgeting* (<http://www.gfoa.org/best-practices-school-district-budgeting>) outlines steps to developing a budget that best aligns resources with student achievement goals. Each step includes a link to a specific resource document with relevant principles and policies to consider.
* *Per-Pupil Expenditure Reports* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/statistics/ppx14-18.xlsx>) is a report series that provides summary and detail per pupil spending data for each school district.
* DESE’s *School Finance Statistical Comparisons* web page (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/statistics/>) provides comparisons of per-pupil expenditure, long-term enrollment, teacher salaries, and special education direct expenditure trends.
* DESE’s webpage on school finance laws and regulations (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr10.html?section=04>) provides a list of municipal payments commonly made on behalf of school districts.

Appendix A: Review Team, Activities, Schedule, Site Visit

Review Team Members

The review was conducted from January 14–17, 2019, by the following team of independent DESE consultants.

1. Andrew Bundy, Leadership and Governance, *review team coordinator*
2. Peter McGinn, Curriculum and Instruction
3. Linda Greyser, Assessment
4. Frank Sambuceti, Human Resources and Professional Development
5. Janet Smith, Student Support
6. Marge Foster, Financial and Asset management

District Review Activities

The following activities were conducted during the review:

The team conducted interviews with the following financial personnel: the business manager, the payroll coordinator, and accounts payable clerk.

The team conducted interviews with 8 of the 10 members of the school committee.

The review team conducted interviews with the following representatives of the teachers’ association: the president, the 1st vice president, the 2nd vice president, the secretary, and the treasurer.

The team conducted interviews/focus groups with the following central office administrators: the superintendent, the curriculum director, the director of pupil services, the business manager, the director of technology, and the special education coordinator.

The team visited the following schools: Athol Community Elementary School (Pre-K–4); Royalston Community School (K–6); Athol-Royalston Middle School (grades 5–8); Athol High School (grades 9–12).

During the site visit, the team conducted interviews/focus groups with 6 high-school students, 12 members of students’ families, and4 principals, and conducted focus groups with 45 elementary-school teachers, 25 middle-school teachers, and 28 high-school teachers.

The team observed 51 classes throughout the district: 15 high-school classrooms, 17 middle-grade classrooms (grades 5–8), and 19 elementary-grade classrooms (K–4).

The review team analyzed multiple data sets and reviewed numerous documents before and during the site visit, including:

* + Student and school performance data, including achievement and growth, enrollment, graduation, dropout, retention, suspension, and attendance rates.
  + Data on the district’s staffing and finances.
  + Published educational reports on the district by DESE, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), and the former Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA).
  + District documents such as district and school improvement plans, school committee policies, curriculum documents, summaries of student assessments, job descriptions, collective bargaining agreements, evaluation tools for staff, handbooks, school schedules, and the district’s end-of-year financial reports.
  + All completed program and administrator evaluations, and a random selection of completed teacher evaluations.

Site Visit Schedule

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Monday**  01/14/2019 | **Tuesday**  01/15/2019 | **Wednesday**  01/16/2019 | **Thursday**  01/17/2019 |
| Orientation with district leaders and principals; review of personnel files; interviews with district staff and principals; document reviews; interview with teachers’ association; and visits to Athol Community Elementary School (ACES) for classroom observations. | Interviews with district staff and principals; review of personnel files; teacher focus groups; students and students’ families focus groups; interview with town officials; interviews with school committee members; and visits to Athol- Royalston Middle School (ARMS) for classroom observations. | Interviews with statewide system of support team members; interviews with resource coaches and consultants; visits to Athol High School and Royalston Community School for classroom observations. | Follow-up interviews; district review team meeting; visits to Athol High School, ACES, and ARMS for classroom observations; district wrap-up meeting with the superintendent. |

Appendix B: Enrollment, Attendance, Expenditures

**Table B1a: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**

**2017–2018 Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Group** | **District** | **Percent**  **of Total** | **State** | **Percent of**  **Total** |
| African-American | 23 | 1.5% | 86,305 | 9.0% |
| Asian | 16 | 1.1% | 65,667 | 6.9% |
| Hispanic | 130 | 8.7% | 191,201 | 20.0% |
| Native American | -- | -- | 2,103 | 0.2% |
| White | 1,275 | 85.0% | 573,335 | 60.1% |
| Native Hawaiian | -- | -- | 818 | 0.1% |
| Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic | 56 | 3.7% | 34,605 | 3.6% |
| All | 1,500 | 100.0% | 954,034 | 100.0% |
| Note: As of October 1, 2017 | | | | |

**Table B1b: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**

**2017–2018 Student Enrollment by High Needs Populations**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Group** | **District** | | | **State** | | |
| **N** | **Percent of High Needs** | **Percent of District** | **N** | **Percent of High Needs** | **Percent of State** |
| Students w/ disabilities | 414 | 43.8% | 27.1% | 171,061 | 38.0% | 17.7% |
| Econ. Dis. | 761 | 80.5% | 50.7% | 305,203 | 67.9% | 32.0% |
| EL and Former EL | 39 | 4.1% | 2.6% | 97,334 | 21.6% | 10.2% |
| All high needs students | 945 | 100.0% | 62.0% | 449,584 | 100.0% | 46.6% |
| Notes: As of October 1, 2017. District and state numbers and percentages for students with disabilities and high needs students are calculated including students in out-of-district placements. Total district enrollment including students in out-of-district placement is 1,525; total state enrollment including students in out-of-district placement is 964,806. | | | | | | |

**Table B2a: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**

**Attendance Rates, 2015–2018**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Group** | **N (2018)** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2018)** |
| African American/Black | 27 | 91.4 | 94.4 | 93.5 | 93.8 | 2.4 | 94.1 |
| Asian | 17 | 94.3 | 91.6 | 93.2 | 92.0 | -2.3 | 96.2 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 146 | 92.2 | 92.9 | 92.1 | 91.0 | -1.2 | 92.7 |
| Multi-Race | 59 | 92.1 | 92.9 | 90.9 | 90.7 | -1.4 | 94.4 |
| White | 1,343 | 92.8 | 93.2 | 92.8 | 92.3 | -0.5 | 95.1 |
| High Needs | 1,046 | 91.6 | 92.2 | 91.6 | 91.0 | -0.6 | 93.2 |
| Econ. Dis. | 875 | 91.8 | 91.9 | 91.2 | 90.6 | -1.2 | 92.5 |
| SWD | 454 | 91.2 | 91.7 | 91.5 | 90.6 | -0.6 | 92.9 |
| EL | 44 | 92.0 | 94.2 | 92.9 | 92.1 | 0.1 | 93.3 |
| All | 1,593 | 92.7 | 93.2 | 92.7 | 92.1 | -0.6 | 94.5 |
| Notes: The attendance rate is calculated by dividing the total number of days students attended school by the total number of days students were enrolled in a particular school year. A student’s attendance rate is counted toward any district the student attended. In addition, district attendance rates included students who were out placed in public collaborative or private alternative schools/programs at public expense. Attendance rates have been rounded; percent change is based on unrounded numbers. | | | | | | | |

**Table B2b: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**

**Chronic Absence Rates,\* 2015–2018**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Group** | **N (2018)** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2018)** |
| African American/Black | 27 | 17.9 | 10.0 | 16.0 | 18.5 | 0.6 | 16.4 |
| Asian | 17 | 10.0 | 20.0 | 30.8 | 29.4 | 19.4 | 7.6 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 146 | 29.8 | 27.1 | 31.4 | 36.3 | 6.5 | 22.5 |
| Multi-Race | 59 | 30.6 | 22.2 | 39.5 | 33.9 | 3.3 | 14.2 |
| White | 1,343 | 24.0 | 20.0 | 22.6 | 25.5 | 1.5 | 10.0 |
| High Needs | 1,046 | 31.2 | 26.4 | 29.8 | 32.9 | 1.7 | 20.1 |
| Econ. Dis. | 875 | 31.5 | 27.9 | 32.0 | 35.1 | 3.6 | 22.9 |
| SWD | 454 | 31.1 | 27.9 | 28.9 | 34.6 | 3.5 | 20.7 |
| EL | 44 | 34.8 | 14.3 | 33.3 | 36.4 | 1.6 | 20.4 |
| All | 1,593 | 24.3 | 20.5 | 23.8 | 26.7 | 2.4 | 13.2 |

**Table B3: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**

**Expenditures, Chapter 70 State Aid, and Net School Spending Fiscal Years 2016–2018**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **FY16** | | | **FY17** | | | **FY18** | | |
|  | **Estimated** | | **Actual** | **Estimated** | **Actual** | | **Estimated** | | **Actual** |
| Expenditures | | | | | | | | | |
| From local appropriations for schools: |  | | | | | | | | |
| By school committee | $22,893,381 | $23,141,577 | | $22,899,085 | | $23,275,738 | | $23,247,141 | $23,054,109 |
| From revolving funds and grants | -- | $2,559,370 | | -- | | $3,047,817 | | -- | $3,275,890 |
| Total expenditures | -- | $25,700,947 | | -- | | $26,323,555 | | -- | $26,329,999 |
| Chapter 70 aid to education program | | | | | | | | | |
| Chapter 70 state aid\* | -- | $17,172,640 | | -- | | $17,267,570 | | -- | $17,319,440 |
| Required local contribution | -- | $2,687,482 | | -- | | $2,897,520 | | -- | $3,090,653 |
| Required net school spending\*\* | -- | $19,860,122 | | -- | | $20,165,090 | | -- | $20,410,093 |
| Actual net school spending | -- | $21,003,203 | | -- | | $21,063,676 | | -- | $20,663,816 |
| Over/under required ($) | -- | $1,143,081 | | -- | | $898,586 | | -- | $253,723 |
| Over/under required (%) | -- | 5.8% | | -- | | 4.5% | | -- | 1.2% |
| \*Chapter 70 state aid funds are deposited in the local general fund and spent as local appropriations.  \*\*Required net school spending is the total of Chapter 70 aid and required local contribution. Net school spending includes only expenditures from local appropriations, not revolving funds and grants. It includes expenditures for most administration, instruction, operations, and out-of-district tuitions. It does not include transportation, school lunches, debt, or capital.  Sources: FY16, FY17, and FY18 District End-of-Year Reports, Chapter 70 Program information on ESE website  Data retrieved 11/13/18 and 2/26/19 | | | | | | | | | |

**Table B4: Athol-Royalston Regional School District**

**Expenditures Per In-District Pupil**

**Fiscal Years 2015–2017**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Expenditure Category** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** |
| Administration | $540 | $571 | $441 |
| Instructional leadership (district and school) | $1,145 | $929 | $967 |
| Teachers | $4,705 | $4,709 | $4,858 |
| Other teaching services | $1,410 | $1,516 | $1,372 |
| Professional development | $153 | $199 | $158 |
| Instructional materials, equipment and technology | $173 | $318 | $249 |
| Guidance, counseling and testing services | $507 | $516 | $512 |
| Pupil services | $1,792 | $1,837 | $1,818 |
| Operations and maintenance | $1,103 | $985 | $1,142 |
| Insurance, retirement and other fixed costs | $3,019 | $3,061 | $3,117 |
| Total expenditures per in-district pupil | $14,547 | $14,640 | $14,634 |
| Sources: [Per-pupil expenditure reports on ESE website](http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/statistics/ppx.html)  Note: Any discrepancy between expenditures and total is because of rounding. | | | |

Appendix C: Instructional Inventory

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Focus Area #1: Learning Objectives & Expectations** |  | Insufficient Evidence | Limited Evidence | Sufficient Evidence | Compelling Evidence | Avg Number of points |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (1 to 4) |
| 1. The teacher demonstrates knowledge of the subject matter. | **ES** | 0% | 11% | 63% | 26% | 3.2 |
| **MS** | 6% | 6% | 65% | 24% | 3.1 |
| **HS** | 7% | 53% | 33% | 7% | 2.4 |
| **Total #** | 2 | 11 | 28 | 10 | 2.9 |
| **Total %** | 4% | 22% | 55% | 20% |  |
| 2. The teacher ensures that students understand what they should be learning in the lesson and why. | **ES** | 0% | 16% | 53% | 32% | 3.2 |
| **MS** | 0% | 24% | 65% | 12% | 2.9 |
| **HS** | 13% | 27% | 60% | 0% | 2.5 |
| **Total #** | 2 | 11 | 30 | 8 | 2.9 |
| **Total %** | 4% | 22% | 59% | 16% |  |
| 3. The teacher uses appropriate classroom activities well matched to the learning objective(s). | **ES** | 0% | 21% | 37% | 42% | 3.2 |
| **MS** | 0% | 18% | 53% | 29% | 3.1 |
| **HS** | 7% | 67% | 27% | 0% | 2.2 |
| **Total #** | 1 | 17 | 20 | 13 | 2.9 |
| **Total %** | 2% | 33% | 39% | 25% |  |
| 4. The teacher conducts frequent checks for student understanding, provides feedback, and adjusts instruction. | **ES** | 0% | 32% | 58% | 11% | 2.8 |
| **MS** | 0% | 41% | 29% | 29% | 2.9 |
| **HS** | 7% | 47% | 47% | 0% | 2.4 |
| **Total #** | 1 | 20 | 23 | 7 | 2.7 |
| **Total %** | 2% | 39% | 45% | 14% |  |
| **Total Score For Focus Area #1** | **ES** |  |  |  |  | **12.3** |
| **MS** |  |  |  |  | **11.9** |
| **HS** |  |  |  |  | **9.5** |
| **Total** |  |  |  |  | **11.4** |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Focus Area #2: Student Engagement & Higher-Order Thinking** |  | Insufficient Evidence | Limited Evidence | Sufficient Evidence | Compelling Evidence | Avg Number of points |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (1 to 4) |
| 5. Students assume responsibility to learn and are engaged in the lesson. | **ES** | 0% | 16% | 42% | 42% | 3.3 |
| **MS** | 0% | 24% | 47% | 29% | 3.1 |
| **HS** | 20% | 60% | 20% | 0% | 2.0 |
| **Total #** | 3 | 16 | 19 | 13 | 2.8 |
| **Total %** | 6% | 31% | 37% | 25% |  |
| 6. Students engage in higher-order thinking. | **ES** | 0% | 26% | 58% | 16% | 2.9 |
| **MS** | 0% | 24% | 59% | 18% | 2.9 |
| **HS** | 53% | 33% | 13% | 0% | 1.6 |
| **Total #** | 8 | 14 | 23 | 6 | 2.5 |
| **Total %** | 16% | 27% | 45% | 12% |  |
| 7. Students communicate their ideas and thinking with each other. | **ES** | 0% | 21% | 63% | 16% | 2.9 |
| **MS** | 0% | 29% | 59% | 12% | 2.8 |
| **HS** | 40% | 60% | 0% | 0% | 1.6 |
| **Total #** | 6 | 18 | 22 | 5 | 2.5 |
| **Total %** | 12% | 35% | 43% | 10% |  |
| 8. Students engage with meaningful, real-world tasks. | **ES** | 0% | 26% | 58% | 16% | 2.9 |
| **MS** | 0% | 41% | 24% | 35% | 2.9 |
| **HS** | 53% | 33% | 13% | 0% | 1.6 |
| **Total #** | 8 | 17 | 17 | 9 | 2.5 |
| **Total %** | 16% | 33% | 33% | 18% |  |
| **Total Score For Focus Area #2** | **ES** |  |  |  |  | **12.0** |
| **MS** |  |  |  |  | **11.8** |
| **HS** |  |  |  |  | **6.8** |
| **Total** |  |  |  |  | **10.4** |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Focus Area #3: Inclusive Practice & Classroom Culture** |  | Insufficient Evidence | Limited Evidence | Sufficient Evidence | Compelling Evidence | Avg Number of points |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (1 to 4) |
| 9. The teacher ensures that students are engaging in challenging tasks regardless of learning needs. | **ES** | 0% | 16% | 74% | 11% | 2.9 |
| **MS** | 0% | 35% | 53% | 12% | 2.8 |
| **HS** | 53% | 33% | 13% | 0% | 1.6 |
| **Total #** | 8 | 14 | 25 | 4 | 2.5 |
| **Total %** | 16% | 27% | 49% | 8% |  |
| 10. The teacher uses a variety of instructional strategies. | **ES** | 0% | 0% | 53% | 47% | 3.5 |
| **MS** | 0% | 47% | 41% | 12% | 2.6 |
| **HS** | 33% | 53% | 13% | 0% | 1.8 |
| **Total #** | 5 | 16 | 19 | 11 | 2.7 |
| **Total %** | 10% | 31% | 37% | 22% |  |
| 11. Classroom routines and positive supports are in place to ensure that students behave appropriately. | **ES** | 0% | 0% | 42% | 58% | 3.6 |
| **MS** | 0% | 6% | 41% | 53% | 3.5 |
| **HS** | 7% | 67% | 20% | 7% | 2.3 |
| **Total #** | 1 | 11 | 18 | 21 | 3.2 |
| **Total %** | 2% | 22% | 35% | 41% |  |
| 12. The classroom climate is conducive to teaching and learning. | **ES** | 0% | 11% | 47% | 42% | 3.3 |
| **MS** | 0% | 12% | 53% | 35% | 3.2 |
| **HS** | 13% | 67% | 13% | 7% | 2.1 |
| **Total #** | 2 | 14 | 20 | 15 | 2.9 |
| **Total %** | 4% | 27% | 39% | 29% |  |
| **Total Score For Focus Area #3** | **ES** |  |  |  |  | **13.3** |
| **MS** |  |  |  |  | **12.1** |
| **HS** |  |  |  |  | **7.8** |
| **Total** |  |  |  |  | **11.3** |

1. High-quality feedback is specific, timely, and actionable. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The district had six schools beginning in 2012–2013 and four schools starting in 2016–2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The six subcommittees are Negotiations, Policy, Budget, Facilities, Academic Excellence, and Public Relations. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The New Superintendents Induction Program is jointly led by the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS) and DESE. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The six subcommittees are Negotiations, Policy, Budget, Facilities, Academic Excellence, and Public Relations. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to DESE data, in the 2017–2018 school year 3.6 percent of high-school students dropped out and 5.2 percent of students were retained. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Common planning time (CPT) is scheduled weekly by grade level in the elementary schools and by content area in the middle grades. Some departments at the high school have CPT. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. SMART goals are Specific and Strategic; Measurable; Action Oriented; Rigorous, Realistic, and Results Focused; and Timed and Tracked. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The district used MAP tests in the 2013–2014 school year at multiple grade levels and then discontinued them. It then piloted MAP tests in the 2017–2018 school year in grades 3–4 and adopted MAP for grades 1–10 in the 2018–2019 school year. Consultants from NWEA have provided professional development (PD) to the District Instructional Leadership Team (DILT), composed of leaders and teachers, twice in 2018–2019 to learn to use and compare MAP results and trends. DILT members have provided PD to teachers to use MAP results. All teachers received professional development from NWEA on proctoring, interpreting results, and using results to plan for instruction. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ACCESS for ELLs stands for Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The two elementary schools are partner schools and the middle and high schools are partners. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Grades 3 and 4 have ELA/social studies and math/science departments. Royalston Community School teachers join their Athol Community Elementary School colleagues for weekly CPT meetings. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. CPT takes place weekly in grade-level teams Pre-K–4. For grades 5–8, content-level teams meet weekly for ELA and math and every-other week for science and social studies. For grades 9–12, CPT teams meet weekly in ELA, math, and science. There is no CPT for social studies at the high school. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. District leaders reported that some elements of inclusion were in place at the middle school and elementary school before the arrival of the new superintendent. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. According to DESE data, between 2014 and 2018 the proportion of Hispanic/Latino students in the district fluctuated with an overall increase, from 5.1 percent in 2014 to 6.4 percent in 2015 to 8.4 percent in 2016 to 8.0 in 2017 to 8.7 percent in 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. School and districtwide task forces include SEL, Early Literacy, Equity, Math Intervention, and Title I committees, school-based Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs), and the District Instructional Leadership Team (DILT). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. High-quality feedback is specific, timely, and actionable. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. An informative evaluation is factual and cites instructional details such as methodology, pedagogy, Standards and Indicators of Effective Teaching Practice or instruction of subject-based knowledge that is aligned with the state curriculum frameworks. It does not commit to improvement strategies. An instructive evaluation includes comments intended to improve instruction. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. District administrators are required to provide Observation Feedback documents to teachers after their announced and unannounced classroom visits. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The district appointed two principals in June 2018; at the time of the onsite review in January 2019, these principals had not received evaluations. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. On Tuesday, February 28, 2017, after collecting public comment since November 2016, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted 9-1 to amend the educator evaluation regulations. The most significant change in the regulations is the elimination of a separate student impact rating. Under the amended regulations, evaluators do not have to make a separate judgment about an educator’s impact on student learning. Instead, student learning is embedded as an indicator within one of the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework’s four standards. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. SMART goals are Specific and Strategic; Measurable; Action Oriented; Rigorous, Realistic, and Results Focused; and Timed and Tracked. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. According to DESE data, between 2014 and 2018 the district’s teacher retention rate fluctuated with an overall decrease, from 89.3 percent in 2014 to 78.1 percent in 2015 to 84.6 percent in 2016 to 84.2 percent in 2017 to 86.0 percent in 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. At the time of the onsite review in January 2019, efforts were underway to improve the process for determining eligibility of district students for special education services; the proportion of students on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in the district dropped 1.3 percentage points between October 2017 and October 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The percentage of students absent 10 percent or more of their total number of student days of membership in a school. See Table 29 in the Student Performance section of this report for chronic absence rates over time, disaggregated by student group. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. According to DESE data, in 2017–2018 (latest available data), 73 percent of students with IEPs were in full inclusion (inside the general education classroom in the district) for 80 percent or more of the school day, compared with the state rate of 64 percent. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In fiscal years 2017 and 2018, the district renovated the high school’s locker rooms, hallways, restrooms, and auditorium. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. According to DESE data, between 2014 and 2018 foundation enrollment in the district increased from 1,726 in 2014 to 1,729 in 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. District leaders reported that the 23-page document was a drafted budget derived from multiple meetings with all principals and district administrators. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)