

Attachment #3: Summary of Findings

Southbridge Public Schools

The Department's Center for District and School Accountability conducted a Level 4 district review in Southbridge Public Schools during the week of February 1, 2010. The complete district review report is in Attachment #3. A summary of the findings in response to each key question follows.

Key Question 1: How has the district addressed the issues that placed it in Level 4?

All but two of the action steps in the turnaround plan have been completed. A job description for the position of superintendent of schools was not evident. The superintendent has not established an advisory council to create an ongoing dialogue with the community.

Key Question 2: Is student achievement on the rise?

- While MCAS results show encouraging signs of student achievement on the rise, particularly between 2008 and 2009, in most cases the data does not yet indicate a trend.
- A review of suspension, retention, attendance, and dropout and graduation rates presents some serious issues.

Key Question 3: Do the district and schools have strong systems and practices in place?

Leadership and Governance

1. The leadership in the district has developed and implemented systems and procedures to address the majority of concerns in the turnaround plan.
2. Stakeholders expressed anxiety and uncertainty about the pending retirement of the superintendent and the process for filling that position.
3. Negative community perceptions of the schools do not accurately reflect the climate in the schools.
4. The district does not adequately involve representatives from the whole community, including the Hispanic community.

Curriculum and Instruction

5. The district has established sound systems and practices for developing and implementing a standards-based curriculum.
6. The district has in place many of the systems and processes needed to establish strong instructional practice.
7. Instructional practice at all levels is not yet of the quality to contribute significantly to the improvement of student achievement.
8. In particular, student achievement data shows the need to improve instruction for special education and LEP/FLEP students.

Assessment

9. The district is making greatly improved and expanded use of data.
10. The district's assessment policies and practices have been increasingly characterized by the continuous collection, analysis, and timely dissemination of student data.

Human Resources and Professional Development

11. The district has developed and implemented an evaluation system for teachers and administrators with the ultimate goal of improving student achievement; the cycle for evaluating teachers with professional teacher status, however, is three years rather than the two years required by law.

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12. The district continues to design and implement a professional development program that supports instructional improvements.

Student Support

13. The district has only recently established data-driven intervention and transition models at all levels to address the academic, emotional, and social needs of students.

Financial and Asset Management

14. The district has put systems in place to manage and monitor its finances effectively.
15. School and town officials communicate effectively and work collaboratively on budget and financial matters, and the town has supported educational needs to the extent possible.

Key Question 4: Has the district built the capacity to maintain continuous improvement on its own, without continued ESE Targeted Assistance support and intervention?

The Southbridge Public Schools have built the capacity to maintain continuous improvement on their own, without continued assistance from ESE targeted to the district.

Note: after the review was completed, the outgoing superintendent retired and the Department assisted in the superintendent search and selection process.

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Gill-Montague Regional School District

The Department's Center for District and School Accountability conducted a Level 4 district review in the Gill-Montague Regional Public Schools during the week of September 27, 2010. The complete district review report is in Attachment #4. A summary of the findings in response to each key question follows.

Key Question 1: How has the district addressed the issues that placed it in Level 4?

The district has completed numerous action steps and attained numerous goals in the turnaround plan. However, the key goal of creating an educationally sound and fiscally sustainable budget for fiscal year 2009 and beyond is not yet in place, and the district's need for leadership in the four areas identified in 2007 remains. In addition, the turnaround plan does not always effectively address the issues that placed the district in Level 4.

Key Question 2: Is student achievement on the rise?

Student achievement in the district presents a mixed picture, with some areas of improvement but some persistently negative indicators.

Key Question 3: Do the district and schools have strong systems and practices in place?

Leadership and Governance

1. Stakeholders expressed different opinions and uncertainty as to which educational plan is driving the school system.
2. The number of central office and school level administrators has increased from 10 in 2006-2007 to 13 in 2010-2011 and contributes to the political and fiscal stress in the district.
3. Members of the Gill-Montague Regional School Committee have difficulty working with one another and do not have sufficient clarity or agreement on appropriate roles and responsibilities of a school committee member, including the responsibility to advocate for the school district budget.
4. Some members of other stakeholder groups are not advocates of the educational system and have difficulty working collaboratively within and across groups.

Curriculum and Instruction

5. The district's curriculum is not complete or aligned. Classroom observations revealed strong evidence of certain instructional characteristics and less evidence of others.

Assessment

6. It is doubtful that the goals for the Year of Assessment can be adequately addressed because of the variation in understanding of goals, roles, and responsibilities throughout the district, because of the scarcity of appropriate resources, and because of the absence of the degree of planning called for by an initiative of this scope.
7. The district's collection, timely dissemination, analysis, and use of assessment data have expanded and improved since 2005, but not all teachers, especially at the high school level, have the ability to use data well to inform instructional and curricular decisions, and raw data is still the primary form of data used in the district.

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8. The district has no systems or procedures in place to evaluate curricular or co-curricular programs and services in order to determine their strengths, weaknesses, needs, or cost-effectiveness.

Human Resources and Professional Development

9. The district has institutionalized the professional development process by establishing a representative districtwide committee to develop a district professional development plan. However, the district cannot address the extensive professional development needs outlined in the plan with the four half-days available in 2010-2011 for professional development.
10. The district's teacher evaluation instrument does not promote growth and overall effectiveness.

Student Support

11. The district has successfully reduced the high school dropout rate through a pre-K to grade 12 effort to enhance the level of connectedness of children to their school communities. To accomplish this, the district has implemented curricula and programs with social development components, along with support programs intended to enhance students' academic performance.
12. Some student support programs integral to the accomplishment of the district's turnaround plan and the superintendent's Strategic Vision have experienced reductions in staffing and other resources and are not functioning at maximum potential.

Financial and Asset Management

13. Many unresolved issues have led to the inability of the district and its member towns to agree on a budget in each of the past four years.
14. The percentage by which the district's actual net school spending (NSS) exceeds the NSS required by the state is one of the highest in the state, contributing to the difficulty in getting assessments approved by the towns. Some areas of higher than average expenditures appear excessive when compared to expenditures by similar districts.
15. The district has few strategies for ensuring that student achievement and cost-effective use of resources are used as critical factors as it builds or reduces its budget.
16. The district makes limited use of regional strategies and inter-district collaboration to contain costs and/or acquire expertise it needs to meet student needs.

Key Question 4: Has the district built the capacity to maintain continuous improvement on its own, without continued assistance from ESE targeted to the district?

The district has not yet built the capacity to maintain continuous improvement on its own without continued assistance from ESE targeted to the district.

Key Question 5: Does the district have the resources needed to implement a turnaround plan effectively?

The district does not have the resources to fully implement the current turnaround plan without continued support from ESE. If it develops and implements a new District Improvement Plan that concentrates more on identifying student needs, evaluating and trimming programs, prioritizing expenditures, and building systems than on adding positions and programs, the district may then be able to reduce its budget and gain the confidence of the towns and the parents, leading eventually to the ability to dispense with the additional ESE resources it has benefited from in the recent past.

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Holyoke Public Schools

The Department's Center for District and School Accountability conducted a Level 4 district review in Holyoke Public Schools during the week of October 25, 2010. The complete district review report is in Attachment #5. A summary of the findings in response to each key question follows.

Key Question 1: How has the district addressed the issues that placed it in Level 4?

While there are positive initiatives in the district to address some of the issues that placed it in Level 4, the district has not completely and systematically carried out many of the initiatives in the turnaround plan.

Key Question 2: Is student achievement on the rise?

Although student achievement in the Holyoke Public Schools has risen slightly faster since 2008 than student achievement statewide, it has not improved fast enough to make a significant difference in the achievement gap that exists between Holyoke students and students statewide.

Key Question 3: Do the district and schools have strong systems and practices in place?

Leadership and Governance

1. While a new District Improvement Plan and new School Improvement Plans are under development, the district is currently without direction since the previous District Improvement Plan was only in effect through June 2010.
2. Although the superintendent stated that school committee members have attended training sessions and understand their role and responsibilities, school committee members demonstrated that they do not have this understanding. The school committee is not fulfilling its role and responsibilities.
3. The school committee, in failing to evaluate the superintendent, and the previous superintendent, in failing to evaluate other administrators, did not hold administrators responsible for the improvement of student achievement.

Curriculum and Instruction

4. While remarkable progress has been made in developing a written curriculum for English language arts and mathematics, especially for kindergarten through grade 8, implementation of the written curriculum is uneven and horizontal and vertical alignment is problematic.
5. Classroom observations revealed some instructional strengths and some key areas in need of attention.
6. The levels of special education and ELL staffing and the training of general education teachers are not sufficient to address the low proficiency rates of special education and LEP students.

Assessment

7. Progress is being made at the school level in the district's K-8 schools in collecting and analyzing relevant student data, making it accessible to staff, and using it to monitor student performance, modify instruction, and determine individual student learning needs. However, the use of achievement data varies in effectiveness from school to school.
8. The Holyoke Public Schools currently lack consistent districtwide assessment policies and procedures, clear expectations for dissemination of data, standardized monitoring procedures, and sufficient professional development support for the analysis and use of data. Accordingly, data is seldom used in a systematic way to make improvements beyond the individual student level.

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Human Resources and Professional Development

9. The district does not yet have a fully functioning human resources system, and as a result it has little ability to influence student achievement.
10. Professional development in the district is a collection of separate events that are not governed by any comprehensive philosophy, policy, or plan to systematically improve student achievement.

Student Support

11. The Holyoke Public Schools have not provided students with the comprehensive, high-quality support programs necessary for improving student attendance, discipline, and graduation rates and raising student achievement.
12. The William R. Peck School (K-8) is transforming itself into a full service community school (FSCS) in which parents, faculty, students, and community allies work together strategically to address the needs of students and families, resulting in significant academic gains. This promising pattern of growth is becoming a model to other educators in the district.
13. The school zones created in 2008 to implement the K-8 model have had two unintended consequences: inequity in student/teacher ratios and class size among the schools as well as changed bus routes and eligibility for busing.

Financial and Asset Management

14. The Holyoke Public Schools have, since the district was declared “underperforming,” received substantial financial support from the state and from grants. However, 7 years later, the district has seen little improvement in student achievement.

Key Question 4: Has the district built the capacity to maintain continuous improvement on its own, without continued assistance from ESE targeted to the district?

Under the new superintendent, the district has set in motion many initiatives that may create the capacity for the district to operate independently and effectively. However, at the current time, the district does not demonstrate that capacity.

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Randolph Public Schools

The Department's Center for District and School Accountability conducted a Level 4 district review in the Randolph Public Schools during the week of October 25, 2010. The complete district review report is in Attachment #6. A summary of the findings in response to each key question follows.

Key Question 1: How has the district addressed the issues that placed it in Level 4?

The Randolph Public Schools have made a concerted and largely successful effort to address the issues that placed them in Level 4.

Key Question 2: Is student achievement on the rise?

The district has increased achievement in ELA and mathematics in the aggregate but not in all subgroups.

Key Question 3: Do the district and schools have strong systems and practices in place?

Leadership and Governance

1. School district and town officials have established a significant collaboration in support of the public schools; they have the view that unified support of the schools will result in higher performing schools and improve the quality of the community.
2. The new school superintendent is developing an educational plan to drive the school system, merging the current strategic plan and the turnaround plan into a District Improvement Plan using a grass roots approach and putting a focus on quality teaching and learning.

Curriculum and Instruction

3. Since 2008 the district has taken significant steps toward Goal I of the Randolph turnaround plan through development and implementation of a standards-based curriculum in many areas. Work continues, as the district does not yet have a comprehensive document that includes all subjects, is aligned horizontally and vertically, and is accessible to all staff and the public.
4. The reduction of the number of coaches at the middle and high school levels reduces support for implementing curriculum, improving instructional strategies, and analyzing data to inform instruction.
5. In classroom observations, the review team found substantial evidence of several characteristics of effective classroom management and instructional practice, but less evidence of instruction that fosters higher-order thinking skills.

Assessment

6. The district has developed a substantial system of formative and summative assessments, creating a culture among teachers and administrators where assessment is central.
7. Teachers are routinely engaged in data review and analysis during district-scheduled common planning time, examining student work and collaborating on the refinement of instructional and assessment strategies. This use of common planning time is part of an overall emphasis on data in the district that as yet has not been advanced by the creation of a district data team.

Human Resources and Professional Development

8. The human resources department conducts a comprehensive teacher recruitment program aimed at employing highly qualified, experienced teachers while simultaneously expanding the

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diversity of the teaching staff. Beyond recruitment, the district successfully strives to create the conditions for retaining newly appointed teachers.

9. The school committee and the administration, particularly the superintendent of schools, have created a labor relations climate with the teachers' association which is conducive to problem identification, dispute resolution, and productive collective bargaining.
10. The evaluation and supervision process is focused on timeliness, consistency, and improved methodology. Not all teacher or administrator evaluations include comments aimed at improving instruction or recommendations for professional growth.
11. The district engages in a substantial number of professional development activities largely dictated by the three goals of the turnaround plan. Not surprisingly, given the general lack of recommendations for individual professional growth in teacher evaluations, there are areas where more professional development is needed.

Student Support

12. Randolph has numerous student support programs at all levels, many of which have been instituted since the district was declared underperforming in 2007. In some cases, these programs are new, while in others they represent reconstituted programs lost during the years before the override.
13. Efforts to improve the performance of special education students have not yet resulted in improved results on statewide assessments. The addition of new programs and accompanying training, along with the district's strengthened support programs for all students, should foster such improvement in the future.
14. The district has increased the involvement of parents in district affairs, thus building a stronger group of interested and active stakeholders committed to supporting its efforts to improve the schools.

Financial and Asset Management

15. The Randolph school district has the support of the town in developing its budget based on goals that arise from a combination of its strategic plan and its turnaround plan. The process used is open, participatory, and designed to elicit input from all stakeholders.

Key Question 4: Has the district built the capacity to maintain continuous improvement on its own, without continued assistance from ESE targeted to the district?

In the opinion of the review team, the district has in place a framework that would allow it to maintain continuous improvement without continued assistance targeted to it from ESE. This framework, however, is still too new to be able say, with certainty, that the district has proven its capability to maintain continuous improvement on its own.