



An Evaluation of the Commonwealth Pilot Schools Initiative

Policy Brief

Key Findings Following Two Years of Implementation

A briefing to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to inform ongoing dialog and strategy as it pertains to whole school reform and improvement in Massachusetts schools

November 2009



Introduction

In November 2006, four schools identified as candidates for designation as “chronically underperforming” schools were invited by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (the Board) to convert to Commonwealth Pilot schools. Each of these schools—Academy Middle School in Fitchburg, John J. Duggan Middle School in Springfield, Roger L. Putnam Vocational High School in Springfield, and The English High School in Boston—had been in underperforming status for four years or more. The following year, a fifth school, Homer Street Elementary School, also in Springfield, joined the Commonwealth Pilot Schools Initiative.

The Commonwealth Pilot Schools Initiative (the Initiative) is intended to introduce substantive reform to schools struggling with persistently low student achievement, and is patterned on a model in place in the Boston Public Schools (BPS). The Boston Pilot Schools model was developed by the BPS and the Boston Teachers Union in 1995. Since that time, the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) has served as coordinator and advocate for the Boston Pilot Schools network. CCE has also served as a resource to the five Commonwealth Pilot schools, which are working to establish and use autonomy in five areas—staffing and hiring, school schedule and calendar, curriculum and assessment, governance, and budget—to their students’ greatest advantage.

Under the direction of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE), the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (the Institute) designed and implemented a comprehensive formative and summative evaluation of the Initiative. This evaluation remains ongoing as the schools enter the 2009–2010 school year (SY10). This briefing is intended to inform policy makers’ and implementers’ understanding of the findings to-date of that evaluation and their implications for the design, implementation, and management of this and other whole-school reform initiatives. Accordingly, this brief is organized into three succinct discussions:

- Implementation Progress
- Initial Impacts
- Lessons Learned

For an expanded view of evaluation findings, please consult the research publications website of ESE’s Office of Strategic Planning, Research, and Evaluation (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/topic.html>). Included under the “Commonwealth Pilot Schools” heading is a series of interim evaluation products, including annual reports featuring detailed summaries of the Initiative’s implementation and initial impacts on school operations, culture, teaching, and learning, which are presented on a school-by-school basis.

Implementation Progress

The Initiative provides a tremendous opportunity to learn from participating Commonwealth Pilot schools' experiences, such that the introduction, design, and implementation of new models for school reform may proceed as smoothly and effectively as possible. An overarching finding derived from these schools' experience is the need to address reform systematically, allowing time for key structures and capacity to be developed, in advance of the pursuit of changes requiring high levels of staff expertise and collaboration, which may not be in place at the onset of reform.

After two years, findings reveal mixed progress in design plan implementation. Plans were developed rapidly in response to a schedule defined by ESE. They called for near-simultaneous development and implementation of an array of substantive changes to school staffing, structure, operations, and capacity. In Year One schools instituted a range of structural changes.¹ However, the effort associated with establishing these structures, training new and incumbent staff to use them effectively, and instilling new cultural norms was enormous, even with the support provided by ESE (in the form of targeted assistance grants and CCE technical assistance). As a result, many changes to curriculum, instruction, and assessment were deferred until Year Two.

Schools have experienced varying degrees of success in the implementation of their design plans. Findings highlight a variety of implementation and context-related factors that have influenced school-level implementation success, which may be instructive to future reform efforts. Following is a brief overview of implementation progress over the past two years, accompanied by an account of factors affecting progress.

Year One: Building a Foundation for Reform

Schools' initial focus was on the hiring and integration of new staff, with staff turnover rates exceeding 60% at two schools, including one in which a new principal was hired in June 2007. In addition to dramatic changes in staff, schools also needed to adjust to changes in student enrollment, with two dramatically reducing enrollment to meet Commonwealth Pilot guidelines, one remaining largely unchanged, and two others experiencing substantial change due to fluctuating demand. One of these schools experienced a decrease in enrollment, while the other experienced an increase. Changes at these latter two schools were unplanned and driven largely by school choice decisions in their communities.

Organizational structures were substantially revised in four of the five schools, with the two high schools adopting Smaller Learning Community (SLC) structures and one middle school adopting a new "house" and teacher team structure. The remaining middle school also grappled with a new organizational structure as it began implementing an Extended Learning Time grant. All of these changes represented significant reforms in their own right, with the potential to profoundly influence instructional planning, decision making, and delivery. Each of these reforms also required extensive organizational and staff development.

Revised school day schedules were implemented at four schools, with mixed impacts on instructional time. Expanded day schedules were implemented at two schools, both of which benefitted from substantial funding through other initiatives. Lacking such financial resources, time for instruction was decreased at two others in favor of increased collaborative professional time. The fifth school opted not to proceed with many of its intended scheduling changes following a self-assessment of its capacity to enact them. Instructional time was also affected by new student advisory and/or related programs in four schools (a fifth continued its existing advisory program).

¹ Throughout this report, Year One and Year Two refer to a school's first and second years as a Commonwealth Pilot, respectively. The Initiative's first cohort contained four schools, its second cohort just one. Therefore, Year One was SY08 for the first cohort and SY09 for the second. The first cohort completed Year Two in SY09; the second cohort has yet to complete Year Two.

New scheduling strategies enabled substantial increases in collaborative professional time at all schools.

This was accomplished through the introduction of a weekly late start or early release day for students at four schools, among other strategies, and through the creation of additional afterschool time at the fifth. This time was largely used for professional development and for collaborative planning at the school, SLC, department, or grade level. Initially, much of this professional development activity focused on establishing new structures and on increasing staff capacity to leverage those structures in support of school improvement.

Compensation was provided to teachers at schools with increased teacher work weeks. The length of the teacher work week increased substantially at two schools and modestly at two others. Teachers received compensation for additional time worked, though the mechanism and source for this compensation varied by district. Lacking additional funding, a fifth school, part of the Initiative's second cohort, did not feel it could lengthen the teacher work week.

New governance structures were established to support school- and community-based decision making.

Governance boards and leadership teams were established at all five schools by winter of Year One. With substantial outside facilitation and support, these boards developed capacity and focus throughout the year. Governing boards worked primarily on issues related to school policy, such as approving annual work election agreements and school budgets, and evaluating the school principal. Leadership teams focused more directly on operational matters and/or staff communication.

Great progress was realized in the development of new structures in Year One, but it was not always a straight or easy path, and some schools experienced greater success than others. Leaders and staff of all five schools reflected at length on the enormity of the change process and on the need to develop internal capacity to leverage the potential of these structures to support school improvement before tackling other, more complex, tasks. Leadership and staff time and expertise were stretched to a breaking point in Year One, particularly at schools from the first cohort. In this context, expectations of progress vis-à-vis implementing new curricula, assessments, and instructional practices were revised as the challenge and need to first accomplish "foundation" tasks became clearer. Notably, the second cohort school chose to maintain its existing instructional philosophy and district curriculum, focusing its efforts on improving the quality and consistency of instructional delivery.

A variety of factors were observed to impact implementation progress, including:

- **School and staff readiness to undertake critical tasks may vary.** Factors such as high rates of staff turnover, practical limits on leadership and staff capacity to manage and assimilate change, limited past experience with school-based decision-making models, and leadership transition (at one school), served to complicate and limit implementation progress. Each school displayed unique assets and limitations that affected readiness to undertake critical tasks defined in school design plans.
- **The scope of change being pursued overwhelmed some schools.** Comprehensive school reform is an extraordinary undertaking, even under the best of circumstances, and each of these schools entered the reform process following years of unsatisfactory accountability determinations. The complexity of this undertaking was sometimes underestimated. One school attempted to simultaneously implement both an Extended Learning Time grant and its Commonwealth Pilot design plan, which were thought to be complementary. Unfortunately, concurrent implementation of two major redesign initiatives dispersed limited resources, including administrative attention, too thinly, with adverse impacts on implementation and school stability.
- **Uncertainty regarding the extent of autonomy granted to schools complicated implementation.** Despite ongoing communication between ESE, CCE, and district leadership, schools expressed uncertainty regarding the extent of autonomy granted to them in all areas, but most particularly in relation to budget, as well as to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This hampered their ability to move forward with intended changes and, potentially, to align budget resources with those changes.

- **Some schools lacked sufficient consensus with regard to aspects of their design plans.** At one school, the principal was selected subsequent to the planning phase, while at another the principal was noted to have limited engagement in the planning process. Where leadership was retained and active in the planning process, high staff turnover rates may also have complicated the equation. One school featured an engaged leader and articulated a plan to recruit staff who believed in the school's intended approach to reform. That school showed the greatest evidence of consensus buy-in to the new school design.
- **School characteristics complicated implementation of the pilot model.** Application of the model in vocational schools or schools that exceed enrollment guidelines (400 students), or in districts with a limited number of schools or in which a reduction in force occurs, may result in more complex implementation needs (such as building SLC structures) or complicate use of hiring or budget autonomy, in particular.

Ultimately, a phased approach to implementation of design plans, such as what evolved naturally during the first year of the Initiative, may offer a more feasible approach and set of expectations for intervening in under-performing schools. The design plan for the school entering as part of the Initiative's second cohort showed evidence of this phased approach, with less broad and ambitious goals for implementation of changes in its first year of operation as a Commonwealth Pilot school.

Year Two: Solidifying the Foundation, Impacting the Classroom

The four original Commonwealth Pilot schools continued their process of change in Year Two, with each having curriculum, instruction, and assessment (CIA) practice among its focal points. As the year began, each school found itself in a unique position relative to its capacity and status, and these factors greatly influenced their pursuit of stated goals vis-à-vis CIA. During periodic interviews, key administrative and instructional leaders in all four schools related a vision for what they intended and were able to accomplish in Year Two. Schools varied in their instructional leadership capacity, as well as in their existing instructional practice and knowledge. As a result, CIA goals varied widely across schools.

ESE support for school-level change was again substantial, taking the form of targeted grants and CCE technical assistance. The focus of support was defined through substantive engagement on the part of the schools receiving services. Much of the assistance was devoted to development or improvement of CIA, but some schools continued to exhibit an emphasis on developing school leadership and planning structures. This was particularly true at the increasingly large and organizationally complex vocational school. By the end of Year Two, all schools reported progress with respect to CIA, but none felt they were near an end point in their improvement process.

Three of the four schools undertook an examination of existing curricula as a basis for assessing needs, two of which made substantial progress in this regard. One school implemented a comprehensive English language arts (ELA) curriculum developed by its faculty under the guidance of a program director, and proposals for revised curricula were also submitted by its science, mathematics, and history departments in spring 2009. This school also sought to improve responsiveness to the needs of its English language learners. A second school engaged in curriculum mapping, adopted "power standards" (which continue to be refined), and developed a number of interdisciplinary "learning expeditions." This school also developed and implemented student assessments in four core subject areas, which it believes are more timely and better aligned with the school's curriculum than standard district assessments.

Less progress was achieved with regard to curriculum at two other schools. One of these experienced high turnover within its administrative leadership team and was still working to develop its SLC and instructional leadership structures. At this school, vocational and academic classroom teachers worked with CCE staff to begin curriculum evaluation and mapping, a process still in its beginning stages. The other school experienced 50% staff turnover prior to Year Two. The principal saw a need to focus on the fundamentals of instructional practice and classroom management and felt that staff were not yet ready to undertake a substantive revision of existing CIA.

A number of factors were observed to impact implementation of planned changes in Year Two, including:

- **Leadership and staff turnover affected readiness to build upon foundations established in Year One.** Following a year of structure and capacity building, turnover rates at the two middle schools exceeded 40%. Similarly, one high school experienced substantial administrative leadership turnover. These unplanned changes affected continuity of key initiatives and eroded capacity established in the prior year.
- **Two schools experienced significant external threats to design plan implementation.** For a variety of reasons, one district elected to close its Commonwealth Pilot school at the end of Year Two. Another school was informed that it would lose revenues supporting its extended day schedule and have a new principal at the end of Year Two. As these external “threats” became evident, they became a major distraction to faculty and diminished focus on, and possibly commitment to, design plan implementation.
- **Some schools reported increased autonomy, but others did not.** Interview data suggest continued tension regarding district accommodation of school-level autonomies, but reports vary by school, even within districts. This uncertainty, which is difficult to validate, may hamper schools’ exercise of these rights.
- **Even where things went well, change proved a gradual process.** No school feels it accomplished all of its goals vis-à-vis CIA, despite their excitement at the progress they were able to achieve.

Initial Impacts

Design plan implementation has resulted in substantive changes to operations and practice at all five Commonwealth Pilot schools. The key question is whether these changes are resulting in the intended positive impacts on student learning and achievement. At this stage of implementation, the answer to that question remains unclear. Data suggest that important intermediate impacts such as improvements in school culture, capacity, and practice have been attained, but the scope—and even the direction—of impacts varies across schools. At the close of Year Two, some schools appeared better positioned to improve or accelerate student achievement than others, based on the proximity of realized changes to classroom instruction.

In Year One, staff of all five participating schools generally characterized the changes they had undertaken as the “right direction.” In Year Two, this sentiment remained largely unchanged at two of these schools, but large proportions of staff expressed new uncertainty regarding their school’s direction at two others. Not coincidentally, these were also the schools that faced uncertain futures due to planned closure or steep declines in available resources.

Preliminary Impacts

The Commonwealth Pilot Schools Staff Survey engaged returning staff from each school to understand the preliminary impacts of the Initiative on several measures of school vision, culture, and practice. A measure was considered to have improved, worsened, or remained the same if the largest number of staff selected that option.

As Reported by Returning Staff at the Conclusion of Year One (all five schools)

- **The first year of design plan implementation resulted in improvements in vision, culture, and practice at four schools.** Each of these schools’ staff cited improvement on six or more of the nine key outcome measures, with no indication of worsening conditions. At the fifth school, impacts were mixed and directly reflected the school’s struggle to implement its design plan.
- **Improvements in staff collaboration and in the schools’ freedom to make decisions were reported at all five schools.** This finding reflects progress made in the institution of new schedules, governing boards, and SLC or instructional leadership team structures within the schools. These changes provided new time for collaboration and mechanisms through which leadership could be exercised.
- **Improvement was reported with regard to the quality of instruction, sense of direction, focus on student needs, and approach to student support services at four schools.** Returning staff of the remaining school generally reported no change on these measures, but they felt the school’s sense of direction had worsened. Collegiality reportedly improved at three of the five schools and remained the same at two.
- **Mixed impacts were reported with regard to student behavior.** Returning staff at the two schools that systematically downsized enrollment overwhelmingly perceived improvement in student behavior, while staff at a third school indicated behavior had worsened. No change was reported at the remaining two schools.
- **Limited improvement was reported with respect to subject area curricula and the use of assessment data.** Returning staff of two schools reported improvement in the use of assessment data, with one reporting improvement in curricula. This reflects schools’ decisions to defer many CIA design plan goals to Year Two.

As Reported by Returning Staff at the Conclusion of Year Two (the four original schools)

- **Progress continued in Year Two, as staff of all four schools cited improvement in vision, culture, and practice.** Two schools cited improvements on all nine key measures, while another cited seven. Notably, staff of the school that showed the least positive impacts in Year One noted modest improvement on five measures.
- **Improvements to curriculum, instruction, and assessment were evident at all schools.** This suggests the intended focus for SY09 was realized. Staff cited improvement in instructional quality and teachers' use of assessment data at all four schools. Improvements to curriculum were most commonly reported at three schools but were also in evidence at the fourth.
- **Improvements in staff collaboration and schools' focus on student needs were reported by staff of all four schools.** Data generally suggest continued progress in these areas. In addition, staff of three schools cited improvement in their collegiality and sense of direction.
- **Mixed impacts continued to be reported with regard to student behavior.** Further improvement was cited at the two schools where progress on this measure was reported in Year One, while behavior continued to worsen at a third. At the fourth school, staff generally continued to report no change in behavior, but a large minority of staff felt that it had worsened.
- **Substantial minorities of returning staff from two schools reported that freedom to make important decisions had diminished.** Both of these schools were affected by external changes (school closure, loss of revenue). Notably, many of their returning staff also cited improvement in decision-making freedom, underscoring the contradictory forces in play as governance and leadership structures continued to solidify, even in light of pending changes.

Catalysts of School Improvement

At the close of SY09, the Commonwealth Pilot Schools Staff Survey engaged all staff to assess the impact on school improvement of 12 specific changes that may have occurred in their schools. The goal of this exercise was to understand the connection between specific changes made and school improvement at this early point in the implementation process. Following are summary findings across the five schools.

Changes frequently reported to have a positive influence on school improvement

The development of school leadership teams, increased time for staff collaboration, and the introduction of new approaches to instruction received the highest overall rankings and were among the six most positive changes at most schools. At the two schools that systematically downsized enrollment as part of their design plan, this change was the single most positive factor in school improvement cited by staff. Similarly, staff of these schools highly valued decreased class sizes as a catalyst for improvement. No other school reported these findings.

Changes sometimes reported to have a positive influence on school improvement

Establishment of school governance boards, and changes to school staffing, professional development, assessment practices, and curriculum were all among the top six positive changes for two or three schools. The relative importance of these changes to school improvement varied widely by school and commonly reflected implementation priorities or contextual factors within the school or district.

Changes seldom reported to have a positive influence on school improvement

Increased school-level budget discretion and changes to instructional schedules were least frequently cited as contributing to school improvement, with no school's staff elevating them to a rank higher than seventh among the 12 changes that were assessed. It is unclear how well budget autonomy is understood at the staff level (many staff chose "don't know," which did not affect ranking) and the extent to which this autonomy exists and/or is exercised by schools is also not entirely clear.

Longer-Term Impact

The Initiative's long-term performance goals are linked directly to student MCAS achievement. In Year One, returning staff at three of the five schools reported improvement in their school's capacity to accelerate student learning, and there was evidence of at least some improvement at a fourth. Ratings were most positive at schools where the most improvement was reported with regard to intermediate outcomes pertaining to vision, culture, and practice. In Year Two, with implementation of key classroom-level changes still ongoing, returning staff at all four initial schools felt that their school had expanded their capacity to improve student learning.

Although perceptions of schools' capacity to improve student learning were generally positive, the Initiative does not yet appear to have had a substantial impact on school-level MCAS achievement. While three of the five schools experienced increases in their overall ELA CPI over the past two years, these increases are consistent with previously established improvement trends in these schools, and there is little evidence of acceleration in these trends.² It is notable that results at two other schools that recently experienced a decline in ELA achievement are also following previously established trends.

Trends in mathematics scores have been flat at three schools over the past two years. A fourth school had shown dramatic progress from 2005–2008 but experienced a modest decline in 2009. However, the fifth school may have begun to show acceleration in this subject area in 2009. While a single year of improvement does not constitute a trend, this school's particularly strong intermediate outcomes and specific emphasis on improving mathematics instruction during SY09 suggest it is an outcome worth monitoring.

² CPI, or composite performance index, is a calculation used to summarize MCAS achievement and illustrate progress towards proficiency. CPI scores are one factor used in determinations of adequate yearly progress (AYP) for accountability purposes. CPI scores included in this policy brief reflect overall scores for all tested grade levels at the school.

Lessons Learned

Examination of the experiences of the current Commonwealth Pilot schools suggests the need for a phased and nuanced approach to school reform. Design plans should engage the right leaders and reflect an objective assessment of school needs, such that they are built upon an awareness of the specific strengths, weaknesses, assets, and deficiencies that exist at both the school and district level. This ensures that priorities for both reform and technical assistance are grounded in knowledge of local context. From this point, new staff, structures, capacities, and tools can be developed strategically, with each phase supporting the success of the next and eventually leading to the goal of true whole-school reform.

Learning from these schools' experience, it is evident that change is not only a multi-step process, but one that is highly customized and open-ended in its duration, with implementation progress subject to changes in a landscape not entirely within the school's control. Nonetheless, several key developmental steps are evident, including:

Leadership Formation: Engage administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders with needed expertise and political/social capital

Planning: Assess assets and needs, develop a vision, and build an effective design plan

Foundation Building: Establish staffing and structures needed to support the vision and design plan

Capacity Building: Develop leader and staff skills and cultural norms to effectively leverage new structures and autonomies

Development: Leverage new capacity to develop new methods and tools related to CIA and student support

Diffusion: Implement new instructional and student support practices

These steps comprise a systematic approach to change that is grounded in Commonwealth Pilot schools' experience and is customizable to individual school and district needs. As these steps are considered, the role of leadership and technical assistance remains ongoing, as each school's change process must be managed to ensure that it builds successfully toward improvement and avoids implementation "meltdown." This management process should be informed by field-level knowledge of what is working, what is not, and why. This assessment can be further enhanced by measurement of specific short- and long-term benchmarks for success.

Several other observations emanating from this study may be relevant to ongoing management of school reform initiatives. These include:

- **Changes of great magnitude may commonly require an external imperative or other catalyst.** The autonomies associated with the Commonwealth Pilot Schools Initiative require concessions on the part of school districts and school staff that may be beyond the scope of what can be obtained in routine bargaining situations. Despite all parties being deeply invested in school improvement, these concessions may be hard to secure, as they affect chain of command, policy, and working conditions that are deeply institutionalized in public education. Absent an external impetus and accountability for change, certain autonomies may be difficult to realize, particularly those related to staffing, budget, and curriculum and instruction.
- **Successful change begins with an objective, deeply informed understanding of need and required support.** Assessment of district and school structures, skills, resources, and capacity can provide a greater understanding of a school's readiness to begin the proposed change process and of a district's ability to support the proposed change. Such a process would also help to define the technical assistance or support necessary to successfully pursue that change. This suggests the need for new or adapted diagnostic tools and

assessment protocols specific to this purpose, which can be applied at both the school and district level, as well as an expanded timeline for initial planning. The goal of assessment is to ensure an effective school design process, including a realistic plan for implementation.

Further, the assessment process may help identify whether schools (and districts) have characteristics and sufficient underlying capacity to make them suitable candidates for the type of substantive reform associated with the Commonwealth Pilot Schools Initiative. Experience suggests that some notable factors that may influence conversion include district size, school size and/or structural complexity, school specialty, the presence of engaged leadership within schools, the sufficiency of administrative resources, and the commitment of school and district leaders to autonomies.

- **Planning, technical assistance, and support may be required at both the school and district levels.** The implementation of autonomies central to the Commonwealth Pilot Schools model may require fundamental changes to existing school and district operations, with implications for budgeting, human resources, governance, and curriculum, instruction, and assessment systems. Further, to the extent that conversion leads to a substantial migration of students and staff, the process may have profound impacts on other district schools. Requiring districts to articulate plans early in the planning process and providing direct technical assistance in support of those plans may benefit schools' design plan implementation and, where applicable, help mitigate possible adverse effects on other schools.
- **Increased clarity regarding school and district accountability could facilitate program management and school success, so long as schools retain their freedom to innovate and refine plans.** As schools applied for Commonwealth Pilot school status, their design plans were carefully reviewed by an appointed committee of the Board of Education. However, accountability protocols associated with design plan implementation are not yet clearly articulated, and the initiative lacks a specified framework of short-term (implementation) and mid-term (culture and practice) performance benchmarks that anchor assessment of progress toward improvement. Lacking these benchmarks, AYP is perceived as the de facto success criteria, which may obscure important intermediate accomplishments. In addition, the establishment of attainable benchmarks for the early phases of implementation may help generate the "quick wins" for staff emphasized by technical assistance providers as a way to encourage buy-in and positive momentum for change.
- **Experience suggests that expedient solutions to financial resource constraints may in the long term complicate school reform.** Decisions that seem expedient may be problematic if they undermine the design process or the ability of a school to focus its resources, including administrative attention, on successful implementation of their design plan. In two instances, schools' plans leveraged financial resources associated with other initiatives. In each case, this co-mingling resulted in a substantial disruption in the school reform process. Although it is tempting to leverage any possible resource in support of school improvement, the implications of pursuing these resources for design plan implementation and sustainability should be carefully considered.
- **Uncertainty regarding commitment to the model complicates implementation.** Despite the provision of substantial technical assistance and targeted grants to the five participating schools, some leaders and staff have expressed uncertainty as to whether ESE is fully committed to the Commonwealth Pilot Schools model. This concern sometimes extends to the disposition of district and even school leaders, as well. Such uncertainty may complicate schools' ability to maintain staff buy-in and to develop and use autonomies, potentially retarding the reform process.