



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

# School District Examination Report: Winchendon Public Schools-Tier III



*data driven*

*standards based*

*learner centered* →

*The Education Management Audit Council  
The Office for Educational Quality and Accountability*

**May 2004**

# **The Commonwealth of Massachusetts**

## **Office of Educational Quality and Accountability**

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## **Executive Summary**

### **The Identification of Issues**

Currently, the district's ability to improve student performance is directly related to the following:

- the poor communication among and between all stakeholders in the district
- the lack of ample opportunity for feedback and involvement of all stakeholders regarding the district's improvement initiatives
- the district's poor dissemination of information regarding improvement initiatives
- the lack of ongoing evaluations of staff, programs, and services to inform and/or evaluate improvement initiatives
- the lack of capacity to sustain the level of change necessary to improve the quality of teaching and learning

### **Findings by Domain**

#### **Assessment and Evaluation**

- The district in its *No Child left Behind (NCLB)* Consolidated Plan identified the lack of assessment as problematic and addressed this in its Improvement Objectives. The plan was approved in July 2003, and, at the time of the Tier III on-site review in February 2004, there had not been sufficient time for the district to increase the utilization of student test data in order to improve curricula or instructional practices.
- Prior to the development of the *NCLB* Consolidated Plan, the district lacked a cogent plan for improving instruction, and the plan is too new to have yielded results.
- Despite administrators' opinions to the contrary, change in teacher practice was limited, uneven, and eclectic and not necessarily aligned with what the superintendent had identified as systemic improvement initiatives, i.e., the *Skillful Teacher* and Differentiated Instruction (DI).
- Despite several exceptions, EQA examiners observed little evidence of informal assessments or periodic checks for student comprehension in use in the classrooms that were visited.

#### **Curriculum and Instruction**

- At the time of the Tier III on-site review, the district lacked a formal staff position responsible for district-wide curriculum articulation.

- The district’s ELA and math curriculum were not completely aligned with the state curriculum frameworks.
- Although the district had planned for curriculum development and implementation, at the time of the Tier III on-site review, it was sporadic and lacked solid focus.
- At the time of the Tier III review, the district had trained 35 percent of professional staff in the *Skillful Teacher* and 35 percent in Differentiated Instruction, an initiative begun prior to the Tier II on-site review. However, there was little evidence that the district’s subsequent professional development offerings were planned using data analyses of student achievement.
- The district lacked staff or sufficient coordinators below the principal level to drive curriculum or instructional improvement into the classrooms. In general, department chairs and coordinators were not instructional leaders and were not fully assessed, evaluated or qualified by the district administration.

### **Student Academic Support Services**

- One of the key elements that undermined the implementation of policies and expectations was the constant turnover of staff and persons in positions of authority.
- Principals were generally consumed with management issues and had little time for monitoring or evaluating the effectiveness of student academic support services.
- There was no evidence that the district collected, analyzed or communicated information on the effectiveness of department chairs and coordinators.
- Until the development of the *NCLB* Consolidated Plan, in the district in general, there was a lack of thoughtful, coordinated, systemic and cohesive planning and program delivery. At the time of the Tier III on-site review, the plan had been in place less than six months, and to evaluate its effectiveness would be premature.

### **Leadership and Governance**

- The district had completed an *NCLB* Consolidated Plan, but the plan was not clearly understood by all stakeholders, including teachers, or widely distributed.
- The results of the analysis of student data (root cause analysis) were not clearly understood by the district’s stakeholders, including teachers, and had not been widely disseminated to those stakeholders who would be responsible for implementing improvement strategies, particularly teachers who would be responsible for curriculum implementation and instructional delivery.

- Principals were generally consumed with management issues and had little time for monitoring or evaluating the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction.
- There was no evidence that the district collected, analyzed or communicated information on the effectiveness of department chairs and coordinators.
- In the district, in general, there was a lack of thoughtful, coordinated systemic and cohesive planning and program delivery.

### **Business and Finance**

- The major issue that still existed in the district was the lack of effectiveness of communication to and from all stakeholders, including the community.
- There was no written agreement between the school and the Town regarding indirect charges. The Town provides the business manager with the supporting documentation yearly to justify the costs, but there was no systematic annual meeting to review these charges.
- Despite recent changes in budget planning and development, there was no evidence that a systematic analysis of student achievement data occurred in budget and financial decisions.
- There have been some changes in the business office that have resulted in better communication with the Town's finance department.

## **Introduction**

In accordance with regulations of Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE) and Chapter 69 of the Massachusetts General Laws (MGL), conducted a Tier III fact-finding examination of the Winchendon Public Schools. During the week of February 23, 2004, a seven-member team from the Massachusetts Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) visited the Winchendon Public Schools to conduct a Tier III fact-finding review. This review was predicated on the Massachusetts State Board of Education's (BOE) declaration of 'Under-performance,' which was based on an earlier EQA Tier II report from May 2003. Although members of the fact-finding team had the responsibility to focus on a specific area(s), collectively, all members dealt with the areas of Assessment and Evaluation; Curriculum and Instruction; Student Academic Support Services; Leadership and Governance; and Business and Financial Management.

The team interviewed the members of the Winchendon School Committee, Town officials, the superintendent of schools, all members of the district leadership team, conducted two focus groups of building administrators at all levels and ELA and math curriculum coordinators, and focus groups with parents, the community, and teachers. The team was scheduled to visit each school in the district. The fact-finding team conducted classroom observations at all levels with the sole focus of observations being the use of academic time, standards-based instruction, and learner engagement

## **The Identification of Issues**

Overall, the fact-finding examination found the district to be actively involved in crisis management, multiple initiatives, fragmented planning, and other actions that constituted a serious drain on the time, energy, and ability of the district's administration. A series of bomb threats, building issues, electrical problems, and political confrontations were contributing to a frantic and distracting environment in the central office. This management environment was exacerbated by the superintendent's impression that a comprehensive plan needed to be prepared for the DOE immediately.

The lack of cogent, and clearly communicated strategic planning, and the absence of a comprehensive effort to build awareness, consensus, and capacity to address issues surrounding underperformance, has led the fact-finding examination team to find a lack of cooperation and capacity in the district to independently initiate and engage in successful change at this time. While there is activity, communication, and energy being expanded at the district leadership level, and the school committee is supportive of the superintendent's efforts, this cooperation is limited to the top-management level and does not extend to the broader district and community membership. Finally, the relations between the school district and the Town leadership, while cordial, are characterized by a high degree of mutual mistrust, anger, and tension. Currently, the district's ability to improve student performance is impeded by the following:

- poor communication among and between all stakeholders in the district
- lack of ample opportunity for feedback and involvement of all stakeholders regarding the district's improvement initiatives
- the district's efforts at dissemination of information regarding improvement goals, objectives, and initiatives
- lack of receptivity and ownership by critical groups within the schools and community
- the lack of ongoing evaluations of staff, programs, and services to inform and/or evaluate improvement initiatives
- the lack of capacity to assess and sustain the level of change necessary to improve the quality of teaching and learning

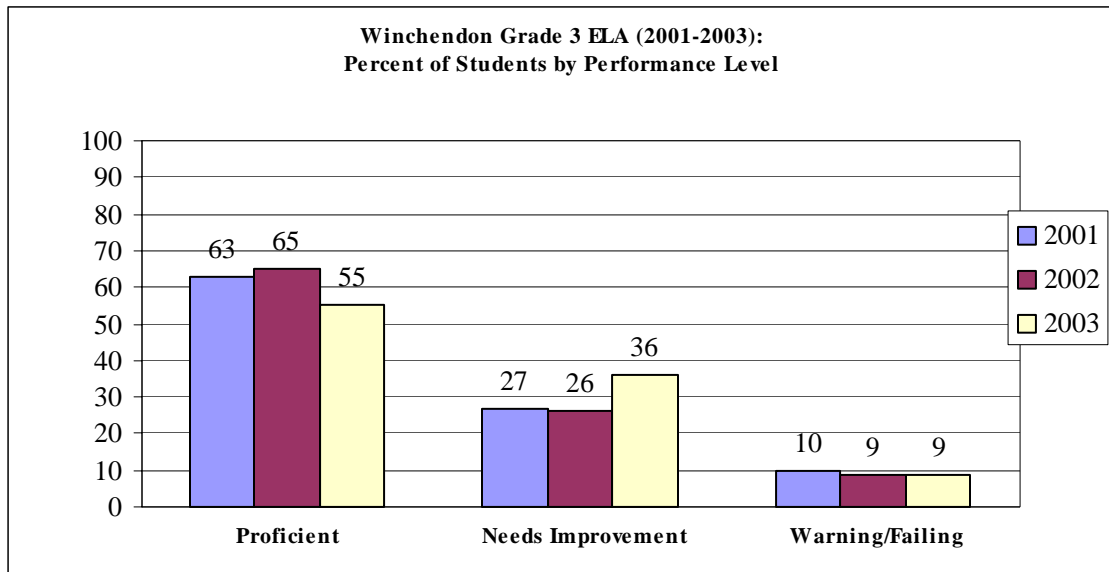
## Summary by Domains

### Assessment and Evaluation

The administrative and teaching staff in Winchendon operate under the assumption that they are doing a lot more ‘formal, informal, and ongoing assessment’ in order to generate useful data. At the time of the Tier III on-site review, the district was collecting student assessment data from the following sources: the MCAS test data, pre-tests and post-tests constructed using previous MCAS test questions, the Gates-MacGinitie Diagnostic Reading Assessment, and the TerraNova Reading test at Grade 2.

Improvement in student achievement as measured by MCAS test scores in Grade 3 Reading, math, and ELA has been mixed, and, in the case of the Grade 3 Reading, Grade 10 math, and Grade 10 ELA, declined between 2001 and 2003, as illustrated in Figures 1-4 below:

**Figure 1:**



**Figure 2:**

MCAS Tests of Spring 2000 Percent of Students at Each Performance Level											
Grade and Subject	Advanced		Proficient		Needs Improvement		Warning/ Failing		Average Raw/Scaled Score		Students Included
	District	State	District	State	District	State	District	State	District	State	
GRADE 04 – ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS	0	1	2	19	82	67	16	13	226	231	150
GRADE 04 – MATHEMATICS	3	12	12	28	59	42	26	18	227	235	152
GRADE 08 – ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS	0	5	52	57	29	27	18	11	235	240	153
GRADE 08 – MATHEMATICS	4	10	19	24	27	27	50	40	222	228	155
GRADE 10 – ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS	4	7	30	29	23	30	44	34	225	229	106
GRADE 10 - MATHEMATICS	4	15	14	18	23	22	59	45	218	228	102

**Figure 3:**

MCAS Tests of Spring 2002 Percent of Students at Each Performance Level											
Grade and Subject	Advanced		Proficient		Needs Improvement		Warning/ Failing		Average Raw/Scaled Score		Students Included
	District	State	District	State	District	State	District	State	District	State	
GRADE 03 – READING	NA	NA	65	67	26	27	9	6	29	30	141
GRADE 04 – ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS	1	8	31	46	53	37	14	10	232	239	160
GRADE 04 - MATHEMATICS	5	12	11	27	54	42	31	19	228	236	162
GRADE 06 - MATHEMATICS	4	13	19	28	39	29	38	29	228	235	157
GRADE 07 – ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS	2	9	50	55	38	28	10	8	237	242	165
GRADE 08 - MATHEMATICS	2	11	12	23	36	33	51	33	223	232	169
GRADE 10 – ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS	11	19	48	40	27	27	14	13	240	242	122
GRADE 10 - MATHEMATICS	11	20	22	24	35	31	32	25	232	237	126

**Figure 4:**

MCAS Tests of Spring 2003 Percent of Students at Each Performance Level									
Grade and Subject	Advanced		Proficient		Needs Improvement		Warning/ Failing		Students Included
	District	State	District	State	District	State	District	State	
<a href="#">GRADE 03 - READING</a>	NA	NA	55	63	36	30	9	7	140
<a href="#">GRADE 04 - ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS</a>	4	10	34	45	54	34	8	10	137
<a href="#">GRADE 04 - MATHEMATICS</a>	1	12	25	28	50	43	23	16	137
<a href="#">GRADE 06 - MATHEMATICS</a>	11	16	20	26	44	32	25	26	162
<a href="#">GRADE 07 - ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS</a>	0	8	55	57	36	28	10	7	154
<a href="#">GRADE 08 - MATHEMATICS</a>	2	12	23	25	29	30	46	33	162
<a href="#">GRADE 10 - ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS</a>	8	20	28	41	43	28	21	12	107
<a href="#">GRADE 10 - MATHEMATICS</a>	6	24	21	27	39	28	34	21	109

At the time of the Tier III on-site review, the district had added a director of MCAS remediation, professional development, and grants. Her role is to analyze all the MCAS tests and additional data with the overall responsibility for testing. The district did not have a director for curriculum, and interviews with the superintendent indicated that the director for MCAS remediation, professional development, and grants also had district-wide responsibility for the oversight of curriculum. When interviewed, this same director, when asked, indicated that she had assumed informal responsibility for curriculum, but the superintendent had never officially delegated the responsibility to her. Other interviewees, as well, indicated that they believed the director had responsibility for curriculum. Data collection and data dissemination were separated from curriculum and instruction. Since the Tier III review, however, the district has funded a position for a curriculum director.

Classroom observations and interviews indicated that, for the most part, teachers used assessment data to place or evaluate students, rather than to inform or drive subsequent planning of instruction. Therefore, although the district has increased its assessment data,

how and why the data are collected and organized had not substantially changed since the Tier II findings. For example, the Tier III examination team found that at the grades PreK-3 levels, data collection and dissemination continued to be used for placement of students into specific classrooms and reading groups, or to qualify a student for special services. Testing started in PreK at the early childhood center with the testing of 2.5 to 4 year olds using DIALAR. When first used, related service staff relied heavily on only the cognitive and social pieces of the instrument. Only recently had staff begun using an expanded language piece to gather more information.

In Kindergarten, students were screened using the DIALAR instrument for placement. Related service specialists, such as speech/language, occupational therapy, physical therapy specialists, and Kindergarten teachers participated in the screening using a number of testing stations. Informal assessments, conferences, and information from home visits supplemented this information. Although in-house meetings on students were held each quarter, this process was conducted largely to keep parents updated rather than to drive instruction and inform practice.

Similarly, at Grade 1, Reading Recovery teachers screened students to qualify them for this tutorial service. The model was a pure one where 16 students at a time received one-to-one service for a period of 20 weeks. Progress information was shared from grade to grade, but this was apparent most in the pod that worked in a vertical team model from grades 1-3. In the vertical pod, and in some Grade 2 classes that had been trained with the Lesley University Literacy Model, there was concrete evidence that ongoing assessment informed teacher practice. This same evidence of ongoing assessment used to inform teacher practice was not readily observed in other pods, where interviews indicated that vertical articulation of curriculum and opportunity for teacher planning and communication were rare. At Grade 2, TerraNova formal assessment in ELA was administered in the spring. This test was used to place students in Grade 3 and to qualify students for an Expanded Learning Program (ELP) at that same grade level, which is a

gifted and talented program. According to the principals, the district intends to do Terra Nova spring testing in math at Grade 3.

In general, until the district's development of an *NCLB* Consolidated Plan and subsequent approval by the DOE, July 17, 2003, formal testing was used primarily for gathering baseline information and for placement purposes. According to a variety of administrative interviews, assessment in grades 4-6 lacked consistency or continuity. The *NCLB* plan, however, identified the elimination of standardized testing as a 'Principal Cause and Contributing Factor' in identifying gaps in student learning. In its 'Improvement Objectives,' the district identified, and at the time of the Tier III on-site review had begun to implement, additional assessments.

All principals were either new to the district or new to their current leadership positions within the last two years. Change in teacher practice was limited, uneven, and eclectic and not necessarily aligned with the professional development offered district-wide, i.e. *Skillful Teacher* and Differentiated Instruction. Some innovations were building based; for example, one principal expressed support for the use of ongoing informal assessment in the form of miscue analysis, guided reading observation logs, and the practice of flexible grouping. However, according to classroom observations in that school, there was little evidence of implementation.

Although both *Skillful Teacher* and Differentiated Instruction were available to teachers district-wide, there was no vehicle to support those that had been trained previously in order to sustain a change in practice, to evaluate the effectiveness of the training, or evaluate the use of this training in the classroom. According to both document reviews and interviews, there was little evidence that classroom observations and principals were conducting teacher evaluations on a regular basis. This was consistent with the information in the Tier II Report. Subsequent information gathered after the Tier III

review indicated that, as of April 30, 2004, principals had evaluated 119 of the 142 teachers who were due for evaluations.

According to interviews with teachers and a review of the district's documentation, at grades 7-12, much teacher energy had been exhausted filling out the 'course templates' that were instituted under the supervision of the director of MCAS, professional development, and grants. There was no administrator with district-wide responsibility for planning and implementing curriculum and instruction. As a result, the district's response to cursory and uneven reviews of the data was reactive and failed to address the issue of increased student achievement in a systematic way. Interviewees indicated that, for example, choosing a new science text for Grade 6 and without regard to a curricular plan for grades 5-8 is likely to happen in isolation at a building level, without thought to systemic changes in science instruction.

In addition to the challenges of improving student achievement, the school district dealt with numerous critical issues since being declared 'Under-performing,' including: a series of bomb threats at the elementary (6) and secondary levels (9), a shooting threat in November, negative media attention, a frozen pipe that flooded an entire wing of the middle/high school, major electrical outages at one elementary school that resulted in the substantial cost of reconstructing the incoming line. The district responded by developing and implementing strategies to create a safer learning environment, which included: the use of bathroom monitors, hiring a school resource officer, securing funding for a camera security system, purchasing metal detectors, locking down bathrooms and implementing student identification cards. These issues were substantial, and the district responded in a timely manner. This said, however, in response to improving the quality of teaching and learning, the district has been engaged in crisis mode and therefore responding to isolated pieces of data.

In some interviews, low scores were thought to be a result of the failure of the school district to engage in curriculum alignment with the state frameworks. Yet, in the vast majority of other interviews, school staff blamed students, parents, community investment, politics, and/or the culture in the community for the lack of higher student performance. In essence, one group blamed another, and no one group accepted even partial responsibility for the lack of solid, consistent improvement in student achievement.

**Finding(s):**

- The district in its *NCLB* Consolidated Plan identified the lack of assessment as problematic and addressed this in its Improvement Objectives. The plan was approved in July 2003, and, at the time of the Tier III on-site review in February 2004, there had not been sufficient time for the district to increase the utilization of student test data in order to improve curricula or instructional practices.
- Prior to the development of the *NCLB* Consolidated Plan, the district lacked a cogent plan for improving instruction, and the plan is too new to have yielded results.
- Despite administrators' opinions to the contrary, change in teacher practice was limited, uneven, and eclectic and not necessarily aligned with what the superintendent had identified as systemic improvement initiatives, i.e., the *Skillful Teacher* and Differentiated Instruction.
- Despite several exceptions, the EQA examiners observed little evidence of informal assessments or periodic checks for student comprehension in use in the classrooms that were visited.

## **Curriculum and Instruction**

At the time of the Tier III on-site review, according to district interviews and examination of local documents, the course outlines for ELA and math were incomplete, as they had been at the time of the Tier II review. When the ELA and math directors (grades 7-12) were interviewed, there was little clarity around whether teachers should be mapping out on the template ‘what they do now’ in each classroom or ‘what they will do’ to improve curriculum alignment with the state frameworks. Therefore, the lack of curricular alignment and a systematic and/or systemic solution to the revision of the curriculum, and its influence on instruction, continued to have a negative effect on student achievement. This alignment process, which has consumed a year of administrative and teacher effort, was unclear and, until the development of the *NCLB* Consolidated Plan, had not been part of a cogent district plan. The lack of fully aligned curriculum in ELA, in grades 7-12, continues to impede student achievement. The percentage of students attaining proficiency, as indicated by MCAS trend data in Grade 7 ELA from 2001-2003, has improved, 30% to 55%, respectively. However, on the 2003 MCAS test 45% of the district’s Grade 7 students had yet to reach proficiency in ELA. The percentages of students attaining proficiency in math was low and indicated little improvement since 2001; in 2003, 25% of the district’s Grade 8 students had attained proficiency, and the remaining 75% were in the ‘Warning/Failing’ and ‘Needs Improvement’ categories.

In 2003, 64% of the district’s Grade 10 ELA students scored in the ‘Needs Improvement’ and ‘Warning/Failing’ categories, 10 percentage points higher than in those same categories in 2001. In 2003, 73% of the district’s Grade 10 had yet to reach proficiency in math, and 54% had yet to reach proficiency in ELA. Interviewees indicated no sense of urgency in completing curriculum alignment, and did not acknowledge a relationship between the lack of a fully aligned curriculum in ELA and math and the vast numbers of students who had yet to attain proficiency levels in the state assessment.

In October 2003, the EQA released a Tier II report to the district, and the Board of Education voted to declare the district ‘Under-performing’ in December 2003. In the Domain of Curriculum and Instruction, the Tier II report found that the district lacked a formal staff position responsible for district-wide curriculum articulation. This remained unchanged at the time of the Tier III review, but subsequent information from the district indicated that the district would fund a position beginning in the 2004-2005 school year. At the time of the Tier II review, the district had planned for curriculum development and implementation; however, at the time of the Tier III review, implementation was sporadic and lacked solid focus. At the time of the Tier III review, the district had trained 35 percent of professional staff in the *Skillful Teacher* and 35 percent in Differentiated Instruction, an initiative begun prior to the Tier II on-site review. However, there was little evidence that the district’s subsequent professional development offerings were planned using data analyses of student achievement.

At the time of the Tier III on-site review, the district was engaged with the DOE in the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) process district-wide. In addition, the district developed, and was implementing, the *NCLB Consolidated Plan* pilot program with the DOE. This Consolidated Planning Grant process requires specific focus on the achievement of student performance, an alignment of the efforts of teachers and administrators toward common improvement goals, and maximizing the use of available resources, both financial resources and human resources. At the time of the Tier III visit, the combination of the two processes, both focused on data-driven decision-making, resulted in an increased awareness of the importance of using data to inform the decision-making process. However, focus interviews with the district’s ELA and math teachers, ELA and math coordinators, and building-level and district-level administrators indicated that, in general, data-driven decision-making was in its early stages and is not yet well used or understood throughout the district.

A review of the district's documentation, interviews with central office and building-level administrators, teachers, and parents indicated that the district, at the time of the Tier III on-site review, had been engaged in some efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning since the Tier II report and the declaration of 'Under-performance.' The *NCLB* Consolidated Plan addressed a plan for teachers and administrators to improve student achievement. Interviews with parent and community focus groups indicated that, for the most part, initiatives to improve student performance had not been widely disseminated to the public and were not well understood. Parents and teachers, in general, indicated frustration with poor communication regarding improvement initiatives.

At the time of the Tier III fact-finding process, the district had no formal, current curricula for grades K-12 in ELA or math that were fully aligned to the state curriculum frameworks. According to district and building-level administrators, curriculum coordinators, and teachers, teachers were provided with copies of the state curriculum frameworks and expected to develop lesson plans that were aligned with the state curriculum frameworks. Building and district-level administrators, curriculum coordinators, and teachers indicated that, at the time of the on-site Tier III fact-finding process, the district did not have current curricula in ELA and math aligned to the state curriculum frameworks. Teachers indicated that they had copies of the state curriculum frameworks and used them to plan instruction. Interviewees at the district and building levels indicated that teachers had developed course syllabi as well. Interviewees at the building and district level were aware that the state curriculum frameworks and the course syllabi did not constitute a formal curriculum. Interviewees expressed a great deal of frustration that teachers had developed curricula in 2000, but they were never completely aligned with the state curriculum frameworks and were not viable documents. Further, according to district and building interviewees, the district did not have a formal process in place to monitor the implementation and/or effectiveness of its ELA and mathematics curricula. The district has district-wide, working professional development committees for math, ELA, social studies and history, and science and technology.

Committees meet during the district professional development days. The ELA and mathematics committees are in the process completing district scope and sequence documents, final course assessments, and subject specific rubrics.

In general, until the development of the *NCLB* Consolidated Plan, a review of documents and interviews with building-level and district-level administrators, curriculum coordinators, and teachers indicated a lack of purposeful, deliberate, and focused alignment among curriculum, instruction, professional development, and assessment. Again, as stated earlier, the plan was so new at the time of the Tier III on-site review, that it would have been premature to speculate that the plan will result in improved student achievement, although that is clearly the intent.

**Finding(s):**

- At the time of the Tier III on-site review, the district lacked a formal staff position responsible for district-wide curriculum articulation.
- The district's ELA and math curriculum were not completely aligned with the state curriculum frameworks.
- Although the district had planned for curriculum development and implementation, at the time of the Tier III on-site review, it was sporadic and lacked solid focus.
- At the time of the Tier III review, the district had trained 35 percent of professional staff in the *Skillful Teacher* and 35 percent in Differentiated Instruction, an initiative begun prior to the Tier II on-site review. However, there was little evidence that the district's subsequent professional development offerings were planned using data analyses of student achievement.

- The district lacked staff or sufficient coordinators below the principal level to drive curriculum or instructional improvement into the classrooms. In general, department chairs and coordinators were not instructional leaders and were not fully assessed, evaluated or qualified by the district administration.

### **Student Academic Support Services**

According to district interviews, at the time of the Tier III on-site review, the school district was providing after-school programs in ELA and math. However, according to teachers, the programs, especially at grades 7 and 8, were not well attended by students. At the same time, MCAS test remediation blocks had been added during the school day for MCAS test preparation in ELA and math in grades 7-12. Some of these changes, especially at grades 7 and 8, were funded through a State Secondary Reading Grant that was intended to provide more time for direct instruction in reading. In addition, the district added an MCAS test remediation class after school at Toy Town Elementary School for any elementary student scoring in the 'Needs Improvement or 'Warning/Failing' categories. To increase the likelihood of students attending, the district provided students in after school MCAS test remediation classes with transportation home. Multiple classroom observations revealed that students in grades 3-8 were using worksheets and MCAS test preparation books. New workbook MCAS test preparation books had been purchased in ELA, math, and science for students in Grade 3 and up. Staff, in general, indicated high levels of frustration with constant changes of direction and focus due to the overall instability of building administrators, staff turnover, unclear expectations, and limited contact from administrators.

Classroom observations and interviews with school staff at multiple levels revealed that students in grades 7-12 still had time in their individual schedules for study hall, which should have been eliminated with the implementation of the Time on Learning Regulations. This was confirmed not only by direct observation, but also by administrative interviews. Administrative interviews cited a lack of funding for staff

members and staff budget cuts as the reasons for the existence of study halls. However, multiple observations in regular education classes, across all grade levels, revealed a teacher-to-pupil ratio of approximately 1:15. In some specialized classes, such as special education or Title I, the teacher-to-pupil ratio was even lower. Each paraprofessional (according to the current paraprofessional contract) is entitled to have his or her own teacher-sized desk in the classroom to which he/she is assigned, which takes up space in each classroom. In classroom observations, exceedingly few classrooms in grades 4-12 had an arrangement of furniture that was conducive to paired, shared or cooperative learning. This served to limit the amount of interdependent or collaborative instruction that could happen in a crowded classroom.

The school committee and the administrators had worked together to write a new student code of conduct book (September 2003) that included higher standards for attendance; however, interviews with teachers revealed that at the time of the Tier III on-site review, the new policies were being implemented but inconsistently depending on the building. Therefore, time on task for students, due to improved attendance, had not increased since the Tier II report. The Tier III examination noted that the district did provide academic services in ELA and math, but did not evaluate the effectiveness of these services. At the time of the Tier III on-site review, responsibility for the program had been assigned to a new staff coordinator, but neither the effectiveness and efficiency of these services nor the program itself had been evaluated. Trend data on the district's students earning a competency determination (CD) indicates the following: the Class of 2003, 95.6%; the Class of 2004, 92.7%; and, as of December 2003, 78.2% for the Class of 2005. These are all below the state's averages.

It was noted during the Tier III on-site review that the administration was beginning the collection and analysis of student attendance data. However, in terms of action, the district, according to interviews with teachers and parents, had not consistently enforced existing policies on attendance and retention. Interviewees indicated that parents have the

final say on student retention, notwithstanding the school committee's policy on the matter.

Focus group interviews with parents and teachers, and interviews with administrators, indicated that there was no systematic or cogent process to facilitate parent involvement in the area of student academic support services. A review of a small sample of improvement plans used by teachers to identify what they would do to improve student achievement did not focus on actions by teachers, but instead listed things that students should do to improve academic achievement. Interviewees indicated that what was found in the small sample was indicative of the same kind of listings in the majority of plans. Interviews and the documentation indicated that there was a community-wide mentoring and assistance program that was developed outside of the school system.

In general, in the district, attitudes toward district leadership and recollections of past interactions with the school system's administration have left people suspect, divided, and alienated about the possibilities for reform. In focus groups, a number of parents who had been in the district for multiple years indicated that the principals at the upper levels were far less responsive to their concerns than principals at the lower grades had been. The general theme expressed by parents was that there was concern over the lack of consistency in personnel, initiatives and expectations.

**Finding(s):**

- One of the key elements that undermined the implementation of policies and expectations was the constant turnover of staff and persons in positions of authority.
- Principals were generally consumed with management issues and had little time for monitoring or evaluating the effectiveness of student academic support services.

- There was no evidence that the district collected, analyzed or communicated information on the effectiveness of department chairs and coordinators.
- Until the development of the *NCLB* Consolidated Plan, in the district in general, there was a lack of thoughtful, coordinated, systemic and cohesive planning and program delivery. At the time of the Tier III on-site review, the plan had been in place less than six months, and to evaluate its effectiveness would be premature.

### **Leadership and Governance**

With the hiring of a current superintendent, the district issued a new contract included an evaluation process that addresses accountability for the district goals. The district's *NCLB* Consolidated Plan was approved by the DOE in July 2003, and the district used the needs assessment that was conducted for that plan to develop a district improvement plan (DIP) that was approved by the school committee in August 2003. Essentially, of the ten goals listed in the DIP, the first five correspond to the *NCLB* Consolidated Plan goals, although the DIP goals elaborate on the *NCLB* Consolidated Plan goals with greater detail. The remaining five goals in the DIP originated, in general, from the district's school improvement plans. While the DIP includes strategies that are specific to the goals, it does not detail how the district will evaluate the effectiveness of the goals. However, the five goals identified in the *NCLB* Consolidated Plan include "Indicators of Success."

In Winchendon, a number of new administrators had been hired in the 18 months prior to the Tier III on-site review, and administrative meetings were occurring at regular intervals and had improved communication between the central office and the school administrators. District leaders, specifically the superintendent; the principals the Title I director; and the director of professional development, and grants; and the data specialist attended professional development days at the DOE to develop a strategic plan based on a data-based needs assessment. In a subsequent meeting, representatives from each grade level at the elementary schools, the ELA and math department heads at the middle/high

school, representatives from special education, the Title I director, and administrators to developed the *NCLB* Strategic Plan that was approved in July 2003. At the time of the Tier III on-site review, the district had expended tremendous amounts of energy developing plans: the *NCLB* Consolidated Plan, the district improvement plan, and a district professional development plan. School councils had developed individual school improvement plans; teachers had developed individual professional development plans, Individualized Student Success Plans (ISSPs) (as required by law) and individual student improvement plans (as required by the district). The district had yet to develop a district curriculum accommodation plan (DCAP), and subsequent to the Tier III, was starting to develop a “Turn Around Plan” (as required by the Board of Education). While deliberate, focusing planning is a critical component of improving student achievement and all that includes, the district has been so engaged in the development of plans, there has been little time to pause, reflect on the effectiveness of any given plan, and determine the best way to proceed. All stakeholders interviewed realized that this was most assuredly a critical time for the district, but many were confused as to the connectivity between and among improvement initiatives. This, in addition to the multiple issues that the district has dealt with since the Tier II declaration of ‘Under-performing’ (discussed earlier in this report) has resulted in the district’s almost constant state of crisis management; simultaneous involvement with multiple initiatives, fragmented planning, and other actions have constituted a serious drain of the time, energy, and ability of the district’s administration.

In general, the district’s work with the DOE on the analysis of student data (root cause analysis) was not communicated to all stakeholders, and, at the time of the on-site review, was not referenced by anyone other than district or school administrators as part of a plan to address the improvement of curriculum and instruction in individual classrooms. While district leaders articulated the importance of, and belief, in a change of direction, most other interviewees expressed overall frustration, a sense of a lack or confusing direction. In general, while administrators, or those few who had been closely involved

with the *NCLB* Consolidated Plan process and involvement with DOE training, indicated the district had, indeed, begun to implement solid, data-based improvement initiatives, the overwhelming majority of interviewees indicated that very little had changed since the Tier II review.

An interview with the school committee indicated that they were confident about their vision for the district and that they had worked on it with the superintendent. Further, they expressed the belief that the superintendent had worked to help focus the district on improvement, especially with regard to the area of finance with the hiring of a new business administrator. They also expressed the belief that they saw a lot of reform work that was in progress.

Historically, the school committee has not had effective communication and/or relations with the board of selectmen, as witnessed in a joint meeting between the two boards. Traditionally, there had been, and continues to be, mistrust and conflict between Town officials and the district's school committee in budget issues, role definition, and the condition of facilities. At the time of the Tier III on-site review, there was no clear indication that the school committee was involved in a planning process to relate the budget to the DIP. This had, in turn, caused more distrust and concern about communication. The following represent examples of the lack of solid, consistent communication at various levels of the district.

Interviews with administrators, parents and community focus groups, school councils and teachers indicated that, essentially, at the time of the Tier III on-site review, there was no process in place to ensure that information regarding the vision, curricula, and other issues was shared with all stakeholders. There was a plan to make better use of the web page and email to increase communication, but not all computers were working at all times. The School Committee Policy Manual had had some revisions, but most of the

staff interviewed were either unaware of revisions or stated that they believed that the revisions, as well as other policies, were being implemented inconsistently or arbitrarily.

Roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined or consistently followed. For example, the school committee, superintendent, administrators, faculty, and other personnel demonstrated confusion about responsibilities, particularly around curriculum and use of data analysis. Interviews with some district and school personnel indicated that there was no one who was officially in charge of curriculum, but yet when the superintendent and building principals were asked who had bottom-line responsibility for it, most of them indicated the director of MCAS, professional development, and grants as the person in charge. When that same director was asked about curriculum responsibilities, she indicated that, to her knowledge, she was not officially responsible for that area. In point of fact, she had been delegated responsibility for all elements of MCAS test remediation, professional development, and grants. The lack of clarity regarding responsibility for a critical area such as curriculum, especially in light of the numbers of students who had yet to reach the proficiency level in any given area of MCAS test, was a concern at both the Tier II and Tier III levels. Subsequent to the Tier III on-site review, the EQA learned that the district has funded a position for a curriculum director for the 2004-2005 school year.

Building administrators consistently indicated that communication with the central office was better than it had been in the past, but they indicated that they were not as comfortable with intra-school communication. In focus groups with teachers, parents and community, interviewees, almost without exception, echoed that same opinion. School improvement councils (SICs) stated that there was a vision for the district and schools but were not able to convey its meaning or intent without actually reading it. Most staff and faculty indicated that they believed that communication, although not yet totally satisfactory, was in the process of improving since the number of faculty meetings has recently increased to every week rather than once a month.

Some of the current school improvement plans (SIPs) had a connection to MCAS test data and data analyses but not all. This same level of inconsistency related to the importance of data analyses to inform decisions and proficiency levels was also evident in interviews with teachers. Job accountabilities had not been articulated for the administrators and teachers in implementing and assessing progress in reaching the goals in the DIP and SIPs. Data on student discipline and attendance were not being used to address achievement issues or faculty attendance data. The perception of teachers and other school-level personnel referred to the lack of consistency of communication sources and opportunities for staff feedback and input. Department heads had not been selected on the potential for leadership ability, since there were no criteria or guidelines for appointment that would require an understanding of, and commitment to, the change process or curriculum development, implementation, or oversight.

Almost without exception, teachers indicated that there was a vision statement that was listed in the teachers' handbook, but none were able to state what it was or meant with any great conviction or clarity. Most teachers indicated that were frustrated about information that was sent to the central office and not seen or heard about again, as in the case of student success plans and curriculum maps. They, as well as parents and community members in focus groups, discussed in great lengths the inconsistencies in the district in many areas such as discipline. They, as a group, indicated frustration and uncertainty of the district's policy revisions that were applicable at the school level. Several single teachers were aware that revisions had been made, but, in general, all referred to the lack of consistency of implementation not only from classroom to classroom but also from school to school.

Parents commented on the lack of consistency in discipline procedures and accessibility of building administrators. In general, they voiced that their experience had proven that general communication was inconsistent, and, when it happened, they felt that they were

denied access to district, building administrators, and teachers. In essence, the vast majority of parents, and some students who attended the focus groups, indicated that there were no avenues for input or feedback. Parents stated they were not always aware of district initiatives except through their children. Parents also expressed concern for the lack of stability in the leadership of the district. The recent appointment of a police resource officer was evidence of cooperation with the town, but interviewees indicated that the Town's building inspector had been uncooperative regarding the cleaning of bathrooms and bubblers not working. In general, the common thread running through all interviews was that inconsistency with regard to communication, expectations, and improvement initiatives, was the rule rather than the exception.

**Finding(s):**

- The district had completed an *NCLB* Consolidated Plan, but the plan was not clearly understood by all stakeholders, including teachers, or widely distributed.
- The results of the analysis of student data (root cause analysis) were not clearly understood by the district's stakeholders, including teachers, and had not been widely disseminated to those stakeholders who would be responsible for implementing improvement strategies, particularly teachers who would be responsible for curriculum implementation and instructional delivery.
- Principals were generally consumed with management issues and had little time for monitoring or evaluating the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction.
- There was no evidence that the district collected, analyzed or communicated information on the effectiveness of department chairs and coordinators.
- In the district, in general, there was a lack of thoughtful, coordinated systemic and cohesive planning and program delivery.

## **Business and Finance**

The Business and Financial Management Domain focuses on two major areas in school district management: 1) Budget Preparation and Development, and 2) Financial and Capital Asset Management. In examining the district's budget preparation and development, the EQA analyzed how student achievement data was used in developing the budget. The EQA examined the processes and procedures regarding resource allocation and effectiveness. The EQA also analyzed how the stakeholders in the budget process (school committee, superintendent, administrators, faculty, staff, parents, and members of the community) had input in the development and preparation of the budget including their level of responsibility in this process.

In examining the district's financial and capital asset management practices, the EQA analyzed the accounting and financial reporting procedures practiced by the administration. These procedures were analyzed for their effectiveness and efficiency of the communication of financial information to the decision-makers in the district and their ability to promote student achievement and accountability to the public. The EQA further examined the reporting of supplemental funding and the effectiveness and management of these funds. The district's facilities were examined regarding the extent to which they promote high levels of student achievement and the encouragement of public support for education.

The Winchendon Public School System's Tier II findings were as follows: 1) for the period under examination, there was no systematic budget planning and development process; 2) for the period under examination, the [former] superintendent did not provide the school committee with sufficient, timely information in order for them to execute their responsibilities; 3) for the period under examination, the ineffectual district leadership (the former superintendent) prevented the school committee from maintaining clear communication with town government; 4) for the period under examination, the district did not maintain adequate accounting and financial reporting procedures to

inform district-level and school-level decision-making. Furthermore, the district did not maintain adequate accounting and financial reporting procedures to ensure effective managerial control over the use of funds or to facilitate public accountability.

Based on the Tier III examination of the Winchendon Public Schools, the business and financial management of the district has had the most significant changes in addressing the Tier II findings. The major issue that still exists in the district is the effectiveness of communication to and from all stakeholders, including the community. This communication issue occurs sporadically in the business and financial management of the Winchendon Public Schools.

The district had begun to undertake a systematic budget planning and development process. The budget process begins each November when administrators begin the budget development using zero-based budgeting processes. The business manager solicits information from the administration and principals regarding their respective budget requests on “Requisition Forms.” These forms are designed to allow description of proposed budget needs, accounts to be charged, and a rationale for the request. Based on a review of these “Requisition Forms,” the rationales provided ranged from detailed explanations and a correlation to student achievement data to an explanation of normal operating expenses. The business manager analyzes prior year expenses related to utilities and other maintenance expenses for budgeting. The newly hired special education director and the director of MCAS, professional development, and grants work with the business manager regarding analyses of programs and possible sources of funding. For example, the special education director, newly appointed, has been able to bring five students back in the district from out-of-district placements. (This was actually referred to by parents and teachers as a major contributing factor in consistent problems with student behavior. Parents and teachers believe the students brought back into the district represented much high numbers). The business manager provides personnel analysis for

new programs in special education and assistance regarding outside sources for professional development opportunities.

The business manager had also worked with the Town's treasurer to clarify the indirect charges. There was no written agreement between the school and the Town regarding these charges. The business manager had questions related to some of the charges and documentation and was waiting for clarification. The Town's practice had not been to provide the business manager with the yearly supporting documentation to justify the costs. There was no systematic annual meeting to review these charges. For example, the town changed its insurance coverage method for all employees to a self-insured program. The Town implemented this change without any input from the school and without a meeting of an insurance advisory committee. There was no change in insurance provider or premiums paid by employees. The change was in the funding mechanism. The school and town also have an agreement regarding the Medicaid funds that the district receives. The district receives 20 percent of the funds collected and the Town receives 80 percent. This arrangement was negotiated by the prior administration, and there is no written agreement related to this.

The school administration had also changed its budget planning process regarding capital expenditures. Previously, the school capital expenses were part of their yearly operating budget. The current administration changed the funding of these projects through capital articles at the annual town meetings. Despite these changes in budget planning and development, there was no evidence that a systematic analysis of student achievement data occurred in these budget and financial decisions.

The business office had begun to provide information to the school committee to aid them in their execution of their responsibilities on a regular basis. For example, the business manager had provided them with monthly financial reports of the general fund budget. The business manager also provided the school committee with information on

the budget status of grants in the district. This information also included the personnel funded from grant programs. At the time of the Tier III on-site review, the district was in the midst of contract negotiations with the unions. The business manager was providing salary scenarios for the school committee to use in negotiations. The district has two major trust funds (the Murdoch Trust Fund and the Robinson-Broadhurst Trust Fund) that it uses as additional funding sources. Reports on these other funding sources, as well as the other revolving accounts within the district, had been provided to the school committee. The business manager had placed the monthly budget updates on the school district's web page for review. In interviews, school councils and teachers expressed concern regarding the communication of information related to budget changes. For example, the school councils expressed concern regarding feedback from the administration and school committee regarding their respective school improvement plans. The plans were submitted, but no response had been provided regarding some of the initiatives, including those with financial ramifications.

The changes in the business office have resulted in better communication with the Town's finance department. In separate interviews with the board of selectmen and the Town manager and the Town treasurer, interviewees stated that the business operations of the school department had improved. The school business manager provided the Town treasurer with the same monthly reports that the school committee and the administration receive, even though the treasurer has access to the town financial system, including the school budget. Procedurally, the Town treasurer does budget transfers and expenditure reclassifications at Town Hall. The school business manager provides the transfer requests and a rationale to the treasurer. The treasurer posts the transfers to the system. In these interviews, the outstanding issue stated was the change from the approved Town Meeting budget to the actual expenditures during the fiscal year. The Town, although allowed by state education reform, perceived these budget transfers, as an example of on-going mismanagement and deception on the part of the current administration. This issue, coupled with the historical financial issues of the prior administration, had created an on-

going environment of mistrust and conflict that resonated through interviews with all stakeholders.

The financial reporting done by the school business office has improved throughout the district. As stated earlier, the school committee and administration receive monthly budget reports. These reports are sent to the Town treasurer as well. During the Tier II review, the school district had a past practice of assigning one purchase order number to several different vendors. This procedure has been changed. Unique purchase order numbers were assigned to unique vendors to avoid duplication and allow for more accurate tracking. The issue that was yet to be addressed was in the grant reporting of the district, particularly historical grants from several fiscal years' passed. The school business manager and town treasurer had been working on these outstanding balances and deficits to address how to handle them. The school business manager and town treasurer had been working on the conversion of the financial accounting system from their current system to the MUNIS system. The goal of this conversion was to further improve the budgeting and financial management of the district.

**Finding(s):**

- The major issue that still existed in the district was the lack of effectiveness of communication to and from all stakeholders, including the community.
- There was no written agreement between the school and the Town regarding indirect charges. The Town provides the business manager with the supporting documentation yearly to justify the costs, but there was no systematic annual meeting to review these charges.
- Despite recent changes in budget planning and development, there was no evidence that a systematic analysis of student achievement data occurred in budget and financial decisions.

- There were some changes in the business office that have resulted in better communication with the Town's finance department.