

REPORT OF TWO-YEAR FOLLOW-UP REVIEW

Massachusetts Department of Education

Matthew J. Kuss Middle School

Fall River Public Schools

Introduction

The Two-year Follow-up Review is the fourth and final stage in the process used to assess school performance under the Massachusetts School and District Accountability System. The first stage identifies schools in the lowest MCAS performance categories that are in need of improvement. Stage two, the Panel Review, involves the visitation of a Review Team to assist the Commissioner of Education in determining whether a school that has been identified as in need of improvement is under-performing and in need of state guidance to improve student performance. Schools declared to be under-performing are required to undergo the next stage of the process, the Fact-Finding Review. The Fact-Finding assists both the school and the Commissioner in determining the reasons for low student performance and in developing a factual basis from which to develop a plan to improve student performance. The Kuss Middle School developed such a plan, and the Commissioner and Board of Education accepted the plan on July 17, 2001. The District is required to direct the implementation of this plan, and within two years, the school must demonstrate significant improvement.

The Under-performing Follow-up Review reports on progress at the end of this two-year period of implementation. The Commissioner and Board of Education will use the Follow-up Review report to issue a judgment on the question of chronic under-performance at the Kuss Middle School. The Follow-up Review was conducted on May 27 - 29, 2003.

The Panel's charge was to analyze data and written information on the school's performance and improvement efforts, visit the school, and meet with school and District officials in order to advise the Commissioner on the answers to the following five key questions:

1. Has the school shown improvement in student performance?
2. To what extent did the school implement the improvement plan which was approved by the State Board of Education?
3. Are there other factors (changes in conditions or circumstances, i.e., policies, practices) in the school or district which have contributed to or impeded the school's ability to implement their plan?
4. Is there currently a sound plan in place to guide continued improvement in student performance?
5. Are the conditions in place to sustain the gains achieved and support continued improvement in student performance?

The Panel's responses to the above key questions that defined the scope of the review are included in this report. These findings and conclusions are the product of the Panel's analysis,

discussion and observation, based on the evidence available to it. A list of Panel members who participated in the review is provided in Appendix A. A detailed schedule of the Panel's activities is provided in Appendix B.

The Panel's findings and conclusions on the five key questions will be forwarded to the Commissioner of Education for consideration, together with the school's status reports and student performance data, in determining whether Kuss Middle School is deemed to be chronically under-performing. The Panel was not asked to formulate a sound plan for school improvement where such a plan does not presently exist or to recommend a course of action to create the conditions for successful implementation of sound improvement strategies where such conditions at present do not appear to exist.

Executive Summary

Students at the Matthew J. Kuss Middle School have demonstrated some progress toward proficiency in expected knowledge and skills since the school's designation as under-performing in 2001. School staff and administrators have made significant progress implementing the programs and practices listed in the School Improvement Plan approved by the Board of Education. The improvement initiatives with the greatest impact on the school's performance include redesign of the daily schedule to provide common planning time for teachers, provision of professional development support during the school day as well as in supplementary released days, regular ongoing support for professional growth guided by Turning Points facilitators, and a positive professional climate reflected in widespread support for improvement efforts. Factors influencing the relatively slow pace of improvement in student performance include serious shortfalls in the 2002 district budget leading to high staff turnover, the purposeful incremental adoption of the mathematics program, and insufficient oversight of instructional change.

The school's efforts to continue its improvement work include participation of a representative team in the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) activities and the development of a 2003-04 improvement plan. Early drafts of the PIM plan indicate significant growth in the school's sophistication in using performance data to guide selection of strategies likely to lead to gains in student learning. Systematic strategies to monitor the quality of implementation of its initiatives as well as methods to assess the impact of new programs and practices on student achievement are absent from the PIM draft, replicating a weakness in the original SIP.

The school's ability to sustain its efforts toward improvement depend on continuing district support for professional development time and consultant services, staff and administrator stability, and maintenance of the positive professional climate at the school. Challenges to the school's ability to continue its progress include inadequate communication with all stakeholder groups, and insufficient oversight of the quality of program implementation and regular assessment of their impact on students.

Following are the findings from each of the five key questions:

Key Findings

1. Kuss Middle School Regular Education students have made moderate progress over the past two years. Special Education students at Kuss have not demonstrated a pattern of improvement and lag far behind their regular education peers.
 - ❖ Kuss students met the requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress in English language arts and mathematics for 2001 and 2002 on MCAS.
 - ❖ As students matriculate through the grades at Kuss, fewer students fall in to the failing category on the standardized Terra Nova test.
 - ❖ National ranking on the Terra Nova shows slight improvement over time.
 - ❖ Students demonstrated improving performance on MCAS English language arts.
 - ❖ Sixth graders improved on MCAS mathematics, but eighth graders declined.

2. Many of the twenty-one strategies listed in the Kuss School Improvement Plan approved by the State Board of Education in July 2001, have been put into place. There are varying degrees of depth and quality of usage of the improvement initiatives. The school does not have a method in place to systematically monitor the impact of new programs and practices on student achievement.
 - ❖ The school relies on yearly assessments as the primary measure of student progress.
 - ❖ Intermediate assessments are being implemented this year (2002-2003) but they have not been correlated with standardized assessments to confirm their reliability.
 - ❖ The school relies on anecdotal information to make judgments on the effectiveness of new programs and to measure their impact on student progress.

3. Several factors have contributed to the ability of Kuss faculty and staff to execute their improvement plan. One major unforeseen event challenged the quality of the school's implementation.
 - ❖ Adjustments to the school's schedule to allow common planning time and additional released time for professional development have been critically important to the implementation of the SIP.
 - ❖ The school's plan relied heavily on the provision of support personnel through Title I and CSR (Comprehensive School Reform) grants credited with making essential contributions to the school's change process.
 - ❖ A major District budget shortfall in spring 2002 triggered unusually high teacher turnover, diminishing the impact of staff training efforts over the course of previous years.

4. The plan for continued improvement developed by the Kuss PIM (Performance Improvement Mapping) team reflects marked improvement in the depth and quality of analysis and planning which enhances its usefulness as a guiding tool for school efforts. The PIM plan was incomplete at the time of the Follow-up Review, lacking several elements that will be critical in making it a meaningful guide for responsive decision-making.
 - ❖ The 2003-2004 PIM plan includes detailed analyses of student performance information on yearly standardized tests, using data summaries provided by the Department of Education.

- ❖ The PIM plan lists causes for poor student performance that include factors more directly within the school's control, rather than external demographic or socioeconomic factors.
 - ❖ The PIM team intends to but has not yet included progress benchmarks to provide checkpoints during the plan's implementation.
 - ❖ The PIM plan lacks strategies to monitor the quality and depth of implementation of its selected strategies, continuing a weakness of the current SIP.
5. A number of conditions must be sustained to continue the improvements in student achievement at Kuss Middle School. Several essential elements of continual improvement would enhance the school's ability to accelerate the rate of student progress.
- ❖ The District must continue providing support personnel, consultant services, released time and staffing to allow common planning time for cluster teachers, essential components of the school's continued growth.
 - ❖ District and school leaders must make every effort to maintain the positive professional climate that underlies all of the school's efforts.
 - ❖ The rate of academic progress can be improved if the school focuses deployment of Title I services to students specifically targeted as needing remediation.
 - ❖ The school's proposed improvement plans require inclusion of a plan for systematic monitoring of instruction as part of a comprehensive strategy for tracking the quality of programs and practices.
 - ❖ Development and implementation of a system of communication that engages all stakeholders in reform and serves to unify the efforts of the Kuss community toward a common vision of quality education will fill a significant gap at the school.

Matthew Kuss Middle School Profile

Enrollment

The Matthew Kuss School is one of 29 schools in Fall River and four middle schools in the district, serving students in grades 6 through 8. Between 1999 and 2002 enrollment at the Kuss School averaged 573 students. In terms of demographics during this period, an average of 82 percent of the student population was White, while nine percent were Black and seven percent Hispanic. There were minor changes in these averages across the four years.

The population of non-native English speakers at the Kuss School between 1999 and 2002 averaged 27 percent, although none were identified as limited English proficient. Sixty-eight percent of the school's student body during 2002 was low-income. Consequently, there was a school-wide Title One program in place at the school.

Retention at the Kuss School, between 1998 and 2001, fluctuated between 2.8 percent and 15.6 percent. Out-of-school suspensions remained relatively steady, averaging 24 percent during this period. In-school suspensions during that period averaged 50 percent. No exclusions were recorded during those four years.

MCAS Overview

Students at the Matthew Kuss Middle School are tested in the MCAS in grade 6 in mathematics, in grade 7 in English language arts (ELA), and in grade 8 in mathematics. In both years of Cycle II (2001-2002), the school was found to have made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in both English language arts and mathematics.

Student Performance in English Language Arts

In Cycle II, the Kuss Middle School received a performance rating of *Low* for its proficiency index of 64.5 in ELA. The school's improvement in that cycle was rated *On Target*. Student participation rates in the ELA portion of the test in Cycle II were 94 percent in 2001 and 98 percent in 2002.

Regular Education

In 2001, 12 percent of Regular Education seventh grade students were Proficient, 47 percent scored at the Needs Improvement level, and 40 percent were at Warning. In 2002, 24 percent of Regular Education students tested were Proficient in ELA, 54 percent were in Needs Improvement and 21 percent scored in the Warning category. The performance gaps of Regular Education students at the Kuss School and the district are wide. High discrepancies exist between the school and state, especially in the percentages of students scoring at the Warning and Proficient levels.

Special Education

In 2001, there were no Special Education students at the Kuss School scoring at the Proficient level in ELA. Twelve percent of seventh grade Special Education students scored at the Needs Improvement level and 88 percent scored in Warning. In the second year of Cycle II, 18 percent of students in this subgroup scored in Needs Improvement and 82 percent performed at the Warning level. Special Education students at the Kuss School fared far worse than their counterparts in the district. Compared to others in the same subgroup at the state level, students at the Kuss School lag far behind.

Student Performance in Mathematics

Based on its proficiency index of 38.6, the Kuss School received a performance rating of *Critically Low* in Cycle II in mathematics. Although the school failed to meet its target for that Cycle, it showed a small gain over its Cycle I (1999-2000) performance. Improvement was rated *Improved Below Target*. Participation rates in Cycle II were 95 percent in 2001 and 99 percent in 2002.

Regular Education

The grade 6 mathematics MCAS test was first administered in 2001. In 2001, one percent of Regular Education students at the Kuss School scored in the Advanced category, four percent in Proficient, 26 percent in Needs Improvement, and 70 percent scored in Warning. In 2002, two percent of students scored at the Advanced level, and 15 percent scored at the Proficient level. Thirty-two percent of students in this group scored in Needs Improvement and 52 percent were at Warning. These students' performance in Cycle II lags behind the District's overall performance. The performance gaps are much wider when the Kuss School's Regular Education students are compared to statewide performance at this grade level.

The performance of Regular Education students in grade 8 in mathematics over the last four years has not followed a clear pattern. In 1999, one percent of Regular Education students scored at the Advanced level, four percent in Proficient, 26 percent in Needs Improvement and 69 percent at Warning. In 2000, eight percent of students scored Proficient, 21 percent scored at the Needs Improvement level, and 71 percent at Warning. In the first year of Cycle II, nine percent of the students tested performed at the Proficient level, 39 percent were in Needs Improvement, and 52 percent scored at Warning. In 2002, one percent of students scored in the Advanced category, four percent in Proficient, 32 percent in Needs Improvement and 63 percent in Warning.

The performance of Regular Education 8th grade students in mathematics at the Kuss School resembles that of their counterparts in the district. However, to align student performance at the school with statewide performance, the proportion of students scoring at the Warning level will need to be reduced by at least half, and the percentage of those proficient tripled. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. Comparing Regular Education Students' Performance in Mathematics in grade 8 (1999-2002)

Regular Ed.	1999			2000			2001			2002		
	School	District	State	School	District	State	School	District	State	School	District	State
Advanced	1	0	7	0	1	12	0	1	13	1	1	13
Proficient	4	7	26	8	9	27	9	9	27	4	8	26
Needs Improvement	26	32	34	21	28	29	39	37	37	32	29	36
Warning	69	61	33	72	62	32	52	54	23	63	62	25

Special Education

Special Education students tested at the grade 6 level in Cycle II did not meet the minimum sample size in 2001. In 2002, five percent of the sixth grade Special Education students at Kuss rated a Needs Improvement classification, and the remaining 95 percent scored in the Warning category.

The performance of Special Education students at the Kuss School in grade 8 has fluctuated widely over the last four years. In 1999, all Special Education students were at the Warning level in mathematics. In 2000, three percent scored at the Needs Improvement level and 97 percent at Warning. In 2001, 40 percent were at the Needs Improvement level and 60 percent at Warning. In 2002, all but 10 percent who scored at the Needs Improvement level, performed at the Warning level. The participation rates of Kuss eighth grade Special Education students

fluctuated from 100 percent in 1999 to 82 percent in 2000, 90 percent in 2001, and back to 100 percent in 2002.

Although in 2001, grade 8 Special Education students at the Kuss School outperformed others in the district, overall their performance has been consistent with the district. To reach parity with the state, the school will have to reduce the proportion of students scoring in the Warning category.

Table 2. Comparing Special Education students' Performance in Mathematics in grade 8 (1999-2002)

<i>Special Ed.</i>	1999			2000			2001			2002		
	School	District	State	School	District	State	School	District	State	School	District	State
Advanced	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1
Proficient	0	0	5	0	0	6	0	1	6	0	0	5
Needs Improvement	0	5	18	3	5	16	40	12	23	10	14	22
Warning	100	95	77	97	95	77	60	87	70	90	86	72

PANEL REPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS

KEY QUESTION 1: Has the school shown improvement in student performance?

Matthew Kuss Middle School has met the requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress in both English Language Arts and mathematics for the 2002 rating cycle, as described in detail in the profile section of this report.

The performance of Kuss Middle School students varies by year and by grade level across all measures available to the team for review. On MCAS, the 2002 groups of sixth graders and seventh graders exceeded the performance of their 2001 predecessors in English Language Arts (grade 7) and mathematics (grade 6). (Neither of these grades was tested prior to 2001.) Trends for eighth graders tested in mathematics in 2000, 2001 and 2002 show dramatic improvement between the first two years, followed by a slight decline at the last of those three years. In English Language Arts, the eighth grade trend more consistently shows improvement. Each successive group of eighth graders at Kuss has outperformed its predecessors on the ELA test.

The aggregate performance of Kuss Middle School students on the MCAS follows fairly closely the performance of Fall River students in general, but lags far behind the performance of middle school students statewide, as described in Table 1 of the profile.

The school also administers the standardized Terra Nova assessment in the fall of each school year. While overall Normal Curve Equivalent percentiles remain relatively stable, the distribution of scores on Terra Nova shows that a smaller percentage of the same cohort of students each year fall into the 'failing' category.

Table 3: Longitudinal Tracking of Terra Nova Ranks (Normal Curve Equivalent) *

	Grade 6 ('00)	Grade 7 ('01)	Grade 8 ('02)
Reading	37.8	47.4	45.9
Language	42.9	47.4	45.3
Mathematics	42.9	45.3	42.8

The rank of Kuss students as indicated by NCE percentiles suggests that students enter the school performing about ten percentiles below the national norm (50th percentile). As students progress through the school to eighth grade, their national rank improves somewhat at seventh grade, then declines slightly at eight grade, varying only slightly from their initial performance. Kuss students maintain and slightly improve their attainment when compared with a nationally-normed population.

Table 4: Distribution of Terra Nova Performance Levels, 2001 – 2002, Percent Failing

Percent Failing	Grade 6 (01) to Grade 7 (02)		Grade 7 (01) to Grade 8 (02)	
Reading	85%	64%	73%	53%
Language	83%	74%	82%	54%
Mathematics	94%	76%	83%	65%

The three years of Terra Nova data allow longitudinal tracking of student performance over time, and the reduction in the percentage scoring in the failing classification is additional evidence that students display improved performance during their time at Kuss. For the two years for which data was available to the visiting team, 2000-2001 and 2001–2002, significantly fewer students fell into the lowest classification. Over the one-year timeframe, 20 percent fewer students were in the failing category in reading. Ten percent fewer seventh graders and almost 30 percent fewer eighth graders were failing in language, and just less than 20 percent fewer failed the math sections of the test after one year at Kuss. When examined in this format, Kuss students demonstrate improvement in performance level even though national comparisons remain relatively stable.

The only significant subgroup of students at Kuss for whom achievement data is available is the special education population. As mentioned in the opening profile section of the report, Kuss Special Education students perform comparably to their district counterparts, but dramatically below the performance of Special Education students in the state (see Table 2). Terra Nova scores are not reported to the school separately for Special Education students, so the Panel was unable to assess the performance of Special Education students on that norm-referenced tool.

For Regular Education students, the area of greatest improvement over the course of the previous two years has been in MCAS English Language Arts. The Kuss grade 7 results show 23 percent more students reaching the Needs Improvement and Proficient categories in 2002 than in 2001, and a corresponding 22 percent fewer falling into the Warning category.

* Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) is a standard score (a score that is expressed as a deviation from a population mean) with the lowest score being 1, the highest being 99 and the mean (arithmetical average) of 50. NCEs may be added, subtracted and averaged and may be used to represent how a student or group of students performed in comparison to the mean. For example, a drop in scores over time means the students are being passed by their peers nationwide and an increase in scores over time means that students are passing their peers nationwide.

Table 5: Kuss Grade 7 English Language Arts, Changes in Distribution

Gr 7 ELA	2001	2002
%Advanced	0%	0%
%Proficient	10%	23%
%Needs Improvement	42%	52%
%Warning	47%	25%

Kuss eighth graders also demonstrated improvement in performance on the last ELA MCAS administered to them (2001) when compared to previous rates.

Table 6: Kuss Grade 8 English Language Arts, Changes in Distribution

Gr 8 ELA	1999	2000	2001
%Advanced	0%	0%	0%
%Proficient	15%	21%	28%
%Needs Improvement	51%	51%	53%
%Warning	35%	28%	19%

Similar to the seventh graders, Kuss eighth graders showed increasing percentages of Proficient students and declining numbers of students in the Warning category of the ELA MCAS between 1999 and 2001, the last year the ELA test was administered in eighth grade.

In contrast to the ELA improvements at both seventh and eighth grades, mathematics performance has declined over the past two years among eighth graders while sixth graders are showing improvement in the number of students reaching the Proficient category.

Table 7: Kuss Grade 6, Mathematics, Changes in Distribution

Gr 6 Math	2001	2002
%Advanced	1%	1%
%Proficient	4%	12%
%Needs Improvement	25%	27%
%Warning	71%	61%

The most recent group of sixth grade scores reported for the school show 8 percent more students reaching Proficiency on the mathematics MCAS, and 10 percent fewer scoring in the Warning level. Eighth graders were less successful than the sixth graders at Kuss.

Table 8: Kuss Grade 8, Mathematics, Changes in Distribution

Gr 8 Math	'00	'01	'02
%Advanced	0%	0%	1%
%Proficient	6%	8%	4%
%Needs Improvement	17%	39%	29%
%Warning	77%	53%	67%

Two percent more Kuss eighth graders reached Proficiency on the '01 MCAS math assessment than the eighth grade class of '00, but there were 4 percent fewer ranking at that level among the eighth graders in 2002 while 1 percent reached Advanced. Twenty four percent fewer '01 eighth graders fell into the Warning category than the '00 class, but the '02 eighth graders had 14 percent more in the Warning performance category. The increase in 2001 and the subsequent drop in 2002 parallel the Proficiency Index pattern on the Cycle II rating for Kuss Middle School

– strong improvement between the end of Cycle I and the first year of Cycle II, with a decline between the first and second years of Cycle II.

Overall, mathematics is the curriculum area in which Kuss students demonstrate the least improvement. Improvement among sixth graders is moderated by declines in the percent of students reaching Proficiency over the most recent two years among Kuss eighth graders.

The student subgroup with the greatest difference from the overall performance of Kuss students is the Special Education population. Among groups for whom there is sufficient sample size to report results, Kuss Special Education students lag far behind the Regular Education students in their rates of Proficiency.

While Kuss students have performed well enough to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards in both English language arts and mathematics, the recent drop in eighth grade math scores raises concerns that the school's performance is not on an overall positive path. If the 2003 MCAS results follow the declining trend started with the 2002 scores, the school would not meet the adequacy standard for the coming year. The Panel determined that the prediction of future performance trends would be unreliable with only these two years' data on which to make judgments.

During the course of the follow-up process, the Team identified three major factors that are likely to have had an impact on the performance of Kuss students in mathematics: (a) the math curriculum implementation process; (b) deployment of Title I remediation services; and (c) curriculum for Special Education students.

During 2000-2001, Kuss along with other Fall River middle schools, began a three year phased implementation of the Connected Mathematics program. During the first year (00-01), all grade levels implemented several key sixth grade units in their classes. Beginning in September 2001 and continuing through June 2002, seventh and eighth grade teachers of mathematics taught several key seventh grade CMP units to their students, along with an additional sixth grade unit. Finally, this school year, 2002-2003, eighth grade teachers have implemented the key eighth grade units for the mathematics program.

According to teachers and administrators involved in the math program implementation process, the decision to phase in the content units was based on an understanding that students enter Kuss (and other Fall River middle schools) lacking essential conceptual knowledge and computational skills. By offering all students foundational experiences beginning with the sixth grade CMP materials, and gradually building up confidence and competence among both teachers and students with the progressive methodology used by CMP, the faculty and administrators expected the program to be more effective at improving students' mathematics proficiency.

The timeline and trend in mathematics performance indicated the strongest improvement in mathematics on the spring, 2001 test. This test was administered during the first year of CMP implementation, when all students in grades six, seven and eight were covering the sixth grade math units. The 2001 sixth grade results show 71 percent of the class in the warning category. The drop in eighth grade math scores in 2002 may be explained by the ongoing phased

implementation of CMP. There may have been knowledge and skills not covered in the CMP units that were in place that year, accounting in part for some of the decline. The results of the 2003 MCAS mathematics test will be critically important in judging whether the hypothetical link between the phased implementation process and a decline in student scores has merit. If 2003 scores increase, that may be attributable to the final phase of CMP implementation, since eighth grade mathematics students will have received instruction in grade level appropriate content and skills for the year preceding the spring 2003 MCAS math test.

A second factor in the lagging mathematics performance among Kuss students is the deployment of Title I remedial services. According to the Title I Mathematics Facilitator, students are selected to receive remedial services based on their schedule not on an identified academic need (students who are not registered for a foreign language are assigned to one of six remedial mathematics classes during the week). In addition, according to the Facilitator, Title I mathematics services are only provided to students in grades seven and eight. The Facilitator has been limited to providing only six sections of remedial math per week. According to her estimate, she spends 80 percent of her time this year providing support to the school-wide Turning Points activities. The Facilitator reported that her time has been increasingly dedicated to Turning Points activities, starting at 25 percent in 00-01, the first year of adoption of the reform model, and gradually increasing to the current allocation of 80 percent. In the judgment of the visiting Panelists, the provision of remedial services in mathematics to Kuss students is less than required and is a likely factor contributing to the weak performance on the MCAS mathematics test.

The third factor contributing to weak mathematics performance at Kuss offers a possible explanation for the significant gap between regular education and Special Education students. Prior to 2001, Kuss Special Education students received an essentially separate placement and curriculum from their regular education peers. In September 2001, the District implemented an inclusion program, placing Special Education students into regular education classes and providing focused assistance with aides and inclusion specialists. The Panel proposes that the exposure of Special Education students to the essentially different curriculum prior to 2001 is a likely factor that contributed to their low success rate on both the MCAS mathematics and ELA tests. Only two years of data are available to determine the impact of the inclusion program on the achievement of Kuss Special Education students. The limited data is too little information on which to base a reliable judgment. Results for 2003 will contribute an additional measure of the effectiveness of special education services in the inclusion model adopted at Kuss. As far as the Panelists could determine, Terra Nova scores are not systematically reviewed for evidence of the impact of the school's academic program on Special Education students' performance. The school may be able to extract information from its Terra Nova data to examine a second perspective on the performance of Special Education students as an important subgroup at the school, but has not done so as yet.

From interviews with faculty and administrators during the site visit, the team proposes that there are some factors that may have had a positive impact on student achievement in ELA over the previous two years. One factor may be a grant-funded program of *Writing Across the Curriculum* began during the 2000-2001 school year, during which 81 percent of eighth graders passed the ELA MCAS as did 53 percent of seventh graders in their first year of testing. The eighth grade

results for that year represent a dramatic improvement over the 1999 results and a significant improvement over the 2000 scores.

In addition to the presence of a writing specialist in the building during the 2000-2001 academic year, the school had the services of a Title I Reading Specialist. These additional specialist positions served both teachers and students, and are likely to have had a positive impact on teaching and learning at Kuss.

During the recent years at Kuss there have been curriculum changes in ELA along with the addition of specialist personnel. The school adopted a balanced literacy model for reading instruction beginning in 2001. The District purchased a new literature series and supplementary reading materials to implement the Turning Points balanced literacy design. Focused activities that became part of weekly discussion and periodic professional development were introduced by the Turning Points coach and expanded teachers' knowledge of balanced literacy instructional strategies. In the judgment of the Panelists, this assortment of efforts and supports are likely to have contributed to the overall improvement in Kuss performance in MCAS ELA.

The Matthew Kuss Middle School defined its goals for student performance in the approved School Improvement Plan (SIP) following its designation as an under-performing school in spring 2001. As written in that original SIP, the goals are global and vague. For example, in mathematics, an improvement objective is, "To build students (*sic*) number sense, data analysis and measurement skills." In a similar style, the literacy objective states, "To promote students' independent reading and critical thinking skills." (*Kuss School Improvement Plan 2001-2003*, page 5) There are a variety of strategies identified for each objective, but the plan lacks measurable benchmarks or a precise timeline for completion. Without these elements, the team cannot judge whether the school's goals are reasonable and achievable. What is notable is the absence of specific goals for students in need of remediation, whether identified as special needs students or merely students in need of support. The school's strategies are defined for all classes and groups, without differentiation for those needing targeted special support.

KEY QUESTION 2: To what extent did the school implement the improvement plan which was approved by the State Board of Education?

Kuss Middle School administrators and faculty put in place many of the strategies listed in the *2001-2003 School Improvement Plan*. The four major categories for change in the plan include Mathematics, Literacy, Writing Across the Curriculum, and Climate, and each area includes strategies for curriculum changes and professional development that are intended to improve student achievement. While the Team determined that many of the strategies have been put into place, there was a noticeable variability in the degree of quality in implementation of many of the efforts and limited systematic oversight and assessment of the impact of the strategies by school and District administrators.

In mathematics, Kuss planners determined that student knowledge was weakest in the areas of number sense, data analysis and measurement skills. To address these gaps, the plan lists seven strategies:

- Use the Star Math diagnostic to assure heterogeneous class assignment;
- Align the curriculum with state standards and develop common performance assessments;
- Continue phased implementation of the Connected Mathematics Program;
- Provide staff development during the summer and on-site consultant support during the year for CMP;
- Track student progress using management software and reporting each term;
- Develop common assessments during monthly curriculum meetings; and
- Use the Title I math facilitator to assist teachers in implementing new strategies.

Kuss faculty and administrators completed several strategies from their original list, primary among them continued implementation of the Connected Mathematics Program (CMP). While no formal alignment was completed, the Team learned that the District Curriculum Director worked with faculty to select the units for implementation that best matched the state Frameworks. Monthly curriculum meetings between middle school math teachers and the District Curriculum Director are reported by teachers to be useful means for tracking pacing of the CMP curriculum and for sharing teaching ideas and strategies. Several math teachers praised highly the quality of the summer CMP training and the strong positive influence of the CMP consultant who has been working with the school for four years.

Less fully implemented are the school's plans to track student progress using management software, and the use of the Star Math diagnostic to guide student placement. In both cases, limitations in technology access and expertise created roadblocks to following the original plan. Also, according to the Title I math facilitator, the time available to assist teachers directly is reduced by demands of her role in providing support to the Turning Points program, a school-wide reform model selected as the focal point for Kuss reform efforts.

In literacy, the SIP approved by the State Board of Education includes four strategies designed to support the improvement objective, "to promote students' independent reading and critical thinking skills." The strategies are:

- Adoption of the Prentice Hall balanced literacy series;
- Attendance at a balanced literacy workshop;
- Development of curriculum guides that align with the MA Curriculum Frameworks; and
- Purchase of additional resources to support the reading program

The school has completed adoption of the Prentice Hall series and Team members observed its use in ELA classes across the school. Classroom sets of reading books were also noted in many classes. Teachers reported attending several literacy workshops and praised their quality and usefulness. The Principal reported that additional workshops will be scheduled to maintain teachers' skills with the balanced literacy strategies.

As far as the Team could determine, the curriculum guides completed in literacy contain some of the components described in the school's Improvement Plan, but omit critical elements which are

reported to be still in development. Teachers and the Curriculum Director described administering the common assessments (benchmarks) at the end of each genre unit. The current academic year (2002-2003) is the first year for some of the benchmark tests. Scores on the benchmarks have yet to be collected and reported in a way that would allow the school or evaluators to use them to judge the effectiveness of instruction or the quality of the curriculum program. They are collected internally and reported to the Curriculum Directors, but their use varies among departments.

To achieve the Writing Across the Curriculum objective of having students be able to write “a cohesive explanation to an open response question,” the school lists three strategies:

- Continue the position of Writing teacher through Title I funds;
- Expect teachers to use writing to foster student recognition of the interrelationships in curriculum content and vocabulary across all subject areas; and
- Require teachers to use *Writing to Explain* as part of their lessons at least once a week.

To provide a Writing coach for 2001-2002, the District re-allocated Title I funds to the continued employment of the Writing coach who had been funded with grant monies. In 2000-2001, Title I fund provided a school-wide Reading facilitator. The writing position is a net loss of one staff support person since the reading position was discontinued in order to accommodate the request for writing support. While students in the focus groups reported they “do more writing” in classes, there was not sufficient time to conduct a thorough review of student work samples across all grade levels to determine if teachers are in fact pursuing the writing target identified in the plan. Examples of cross-content area attention to the development of language and vocabulary skills were widely evident in the classrooms visited during the follow-up review. Science, math, and social studies classrooms as well as reading and English classrooms had “word walls” with terms found not only in the subject the room served, but for other subjects as well. Math terms were posted in the reading room, and literature vocabulary was on a science wall. At this time, teachers appear to have adopted the target identified in this area of the improvement plan.

The Kuss objective related to school climate proposes to have students “be able to recognize how an event or series of events can be responsible for the creation of various outcomes.” To achieve this objective, the 2001-2003 SIP proposes seven strategies:

- Draft a Kuss Constitution;
- Realign the referral process;
- Build student responsibility through the student government and leadership groups;
- Continue Peer Mediation Coordinator;
- Expand the student services center;
- Expand relationships with outside agencies serving Kuss students; and
- Offer classroom management workshops for teachers

The Kuss Constitution was developed as a set of five school-wide behavior rules that are both general (“respect our property and be considerate of others”) and specific (“must have a pass to be in the halls”). The Team saw the document posted around the building, but also noted variable compliance with the tardiness rule. Inconsistent application of school rules was reported by students in the focus group as a major source of irritation. The referral process is still under

review, according to the Turning Points coach who is working with the Vice Principals to develop a more effective system. As a result, there is little progress that could be verified in reducing the number of students being referred to the office for disciplinary reasons.

Student government and leadership activities were suspended this year when the teacher who volunteered to advise these groups had to take a leave of absence. The Student Services Center is in place and reportedly serves 75 students for a variety of needs. Extending relationships with outside agencies has not been a focal point for the Principal, superceded by efforts to attend to academic needs at the school. Both Turning Points workshops and District sponsored seminars have been provided for Kuss teachers in classroom management strategies. The Team did not have information about the number of teachers attending or an evaluation of the quality of the training sessions.

Of the twenty-one strategies specified in the Kuss 2001-2003 School Improvement Plan, many have been fully or partially completed. However, the school has not evaluated the implementation of its plan to determine if the strategies are having the desired impact on student performance. The school relies on MCAS and Terra Nova as the primary data sources on which to judge whether their strategies have led to improved performance. However, those assessments do not offer accessible measures of short term changes or changes across relevant subgroups within the school. As a result, the school has little information about the success of its plan and has not adjusted the plan during the 2001-2003 term to better address learning gaps.

The Review Panel determined that a critical gap exists between the SIP approved by the State Board of Education and the needs identified by the Panel review and Fact-Finding report. Those earlier evaluations indicated that instructional quality varied across the school, and recommended that the school improve oversight and monitoring of instructional quality. In its SIP, Kuss planners included a number of professional development events, and indicated their intention to have administrators visit classes daily. However, at the time of the follow-up review, they have not yet set up a system for tracking whether the instructional practices addressed in the development workshops have been implemented effectively or whether changes in practices are being used widely. As reported to the Team by teachers, administrators, and district personnel, responsibility for instructional oversight is distributed among Curriculum Directors, the Turning Points coach, and the Vice Principals. Teachers report, however, that curriculum directors seldom visit classes for extended periods of time, and that Vice Principals may visit occasionally, but not on a regular basis and generally not with a specific instructional monitoring purpose in mind. In most cases, the daily time of the Vice Principals and principal is occupied by the discipline demands across the school. As a result, a critical component of the SIP, the assessment of the changes in instructional practices resulting from the many professional development activities, has not occurred.

Across the twenty-one strategies listed in the SIP, the school is unable to identify any one which can be linked to changes in student achievement. However, teachers frequently mentioned the changes in scheduling that allowed them three common planning periods per week for professional conversations as the overarching change that has had the greatest impact on both the professional climate and on instruction. From the descriptions of the many activities undertaken by the staff to implement the school's improvement plan, the Review Team agrees that few if

any would have occurred without the schedule adjustment. Clusters use one common planning session per week to meet with the Turning Points coach to set cluster goals, to review student work, to share strategies and to identify areas where curriculum topics, skills, and concepts can be integrated across content areas. A second common planning session per week is used to meet in content pairs with the grade level teacher of the same subject to coordinate adjustments in the curriculum scope and sequence as well as to share lesson ideas. A third session is often used for parent meetings or to discuss individual student concerns. The common planning time during the day allows for small group professional growth opportunities within the required time limits of the teacher contract.

While the common planning time for cluster teachers is credited with significant improvements in the professional climate at Kuss, there are concerns that the independence of each of the teaching clusters may impede overall school progress. Turning Points consultants worked with each cluster this year to develop cluster-specific goals and targets. Each team identified a general academic or behavioral target, and has used its cluster time together to develop strategies to address their individual goals. While admirable that teachers are directly involved in goal-setting and planning for improvement, the individual cluster goals do not appear to be closely linked to the overall school goals identified through the analysis of student academic achievement information. Similar to concerns raised about insufficient monitoring of instruction school-wide, the clusters have few strategies for tracking what changes have been tried and whether they have had a positive impact on student achievement. Plans to maintain a cluster log of weekly meetings have not been sustained throughout the year, so anecdotal reports are the only record of improvement strategies pursued by each team.

A second change that appears to the Team to have had an impact on Kuss teachers is the focused attention to specific school needs in the professional development offered to staff members. Differentiated instruction was the focus of a course offered by the University of Rhode Island in 2001 attended by several Kuss faculty. This past fall (2002), the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) offered an eighteen hour course on differentiation strategies. This was attended by a large number of Kuss faculty members. Differentiation of instruction was an area of weakness at Kuss identified in the Panel Review Reports and the 2001 Fact-Finding Report.

To serve the school's need for focused professional intervention, the District provides at least one early release day per month, along with the four full day opportunities throughout the year. Turning Points activities are conducted on these release days. It is likely that these extensive professional development opportunities have had an impact on teaching at Kuss, but there are no systems in place to monitor whether the strategies for improvement have been implemented or to determine the quality of implementation of many of the school's curriculum modifications.

Responsibility for overseeing curriculum implementation is delegated to the District Curriculum Directors and the Vice Principals. According to teacher reports, monthly meetings between content area teachers and their Curriculum Director are used to review pacing of the curriculum to consider adjustments or modifications to meet teacher and student needs. Teachers indicated they receive few visits during which their instruction is assessed, except for those visits required by contract. Only rarely did teachers report participating in peer review and observation, and the Vice Principal visits are generally cursory and irregular. The Vice Principals indicated that they

receive little professional development support in evaluation and instructional supervision, and the lack of regular meeting time among the building administrators limits their opportunity to coordinate a comprehensive system for instructional oversight.

From the observations of the Review Team during the follow-up visit, the concerns about the variability of instructional quality mentioned in the earlier evaluations at Kuss continue. While there are some examples of engaging, challenging instruction, for the most part the classes visited during the Follow-up Review remain undifferentiated, teacher-directed, and unchallenging. Without a regular process for monitoring and evaluating the quality of instruction, the school is unlikely to make significant instructional change, the key factor contributing to the low performance levels of Kuss students.

KEY QUESTION 3: Are there other factors (changes in conditions or circumstances, i.e., policies, practices) in the school or district which have contributed to or impeded the school's ability to implement their plan?

Several unforeseen factors had a negative impact on the implementation of the Kuss School Improvement Plan: (a) district budget shortfalls, (b) federal school choice regulations, (c) funding gaps, and (d) technical problems. Several planned efforts have had a positive impact on the degree of the school's implementation: (a) additional released time; (b) schedule adjustments; (c) consultant funding; and (d) additional curriculum materials. A few unexpected program changes hold the promise of enhancing the improvement efforts at Kuss in the future.

The Fall River School District faced significant budget shortfalls in winter and spring, 2002 which had a dramatic impact on Kuss programs and staff. In March 2002, Kuss administrators notified 35 faculty members of the possibility they would not be guaranteed a contract for the 2002-2003 school year. As a result, a number of staff members accepted positions in other school districts producing a large number of new or novice teachers at Kuss for the current term. According to the Principal, 75 percent of the current staff has been at Kuss for fewer than three years, a significant drain on the capacity of the school to orient and prepare teachers to implement the school's improvement strategies.

Federal regulations following from Public Law 107-110 (NCLB) have limited the ability of the District to address the movement of students from Kuss to other schools. Administrators and staff reported that Kuss has a negative reputation within the district, and proposed the claim that parents seek and receive District permission to send their children to other Fall River middle schools. This drain of students is perceived to be a factor in the high need rate among the Kuss population. In its SIP prepared following the Fact-Finding Report, Kuss planners proposed a change in District practices to allow fewer transfers from the sending region to attempt to diversify the Kuss population. However, two of the three Fall River Title I middle schools failed to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress and were identified as Title I schools in need of improvement. Federal regulations require that students be allowed to transfer from those schools to any other school in the district, limiting the flexibility of District practices on internal transfers.

Three other unforeseen changes reduced the ability of Kuss to fully implement its plan. The school's climate goals included implementation of a Peer Mediation program, which was never funded by the District and never implemented since the SIP was approved. Plans were in place to expand the programs at the Student Services Center, but an essential receptionist position was not funded and the expansion plans were not implemented. As mentioned earlier, technical problems interfered with administration of the Star Math diagnostic tool this year, reducing the amount of meaningful student diagnostic information available to teachers.

In contrast to the factors that have impeded implementation of the Kuss improvement strategies, several planned efforts have had a positive impact on the school's improvement efforts. As indicated earlier, the initiatives described in the Kuss 2001-2003 SIP could not have been implemented without the extensive professional development provided for both veteran and novice staff. The District has allowed half-time release days to accommodate the need among Kuss staff members for time within the contracted school day to participate in professional training experiences. Adjustments to the daily schedule at Kuss complemented the additional released time by providing for three common planning sessions per week for extended professional discussions. The schedule adjustments required re-deployment of staff and some effort among district and building staff to accommodate varied and contrasting needs.

The school's CSRD (Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration) grant provided funding for essential consultants in the mathematics program (CMP), in balanced literacy, and for the Turning Points coaches who facilitate some of the school's improvement efforts. Teachers indicated to the Review Team their perception that the consultant assistance has been essential to their implementation of new teaching strategies. Teachers also indicated praise for the District's purchase of essential curriculum materials for the math program (manipulatives, graphing calculators), and for the new ELA balanced literacy program supplies (texts, reading resources).

Three new grants received by the District hold the promise of having a positive impact on Kuss improvement. Two 21st Century Learning Community grants were received by the Fall River District and one will be used to conduct adult education programs and extended school day programs at Kuss. According to school and district personnel, the adult education component is hoped to bring more parent/ community involvement in school activities. A grant for the development and enhancement of social studies teachers involves the District in a partnership with the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth to provide courses toward completion of a Master of Arts in Teaching degree targeted at social studies teachers. Finally, the District received a grant from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) as a product of the efforts of a Kuss science teacher and the District Science Coordinator. The grant will provide instructional materials and teacher training for the school to participate in space science learning activities and projects.

Both school and district personnel are optimistic these grant programs will supplement the local improvement efforts and provide positive experiences for students that enhance their achievement. While receipt of these grants reflects well on school and district efforts, the Review Team was unable to determine whether the strategies that will be part of the grant activities are closely linked to the specific student learning needs of Kuss students. The Team did not propose any evaluation or prediction of the potential impact of the grants on Kuss students' achievement.

The collective bargaining agreement between the District and its professional staff has been a factor in the design and implementation of the 2001-2003 Kuss SIP. The plan to service Special Education students in a full inclusion model required extended discussion and negotiation with the Massachusetts Teachers Association before it could be implemented. The SIP describes changes to the lesson plan format for Kuss teachers to add references to state standards. This requirement conflicts with contract specifications, so teachers include those new elements in their lesson plans on a voluntary basis. Also voluntary is teachers' assistance to students after school, since the contract calls for the teacher workday that corresponds with student's daily time. Many teachers indicated they provide after school, before school and during school help to struggling students, but these efforts are outside the negotiated contract requirements and cannot be mandatory. The contract specifications somewhat limit the school's ability to design systematic support programs since many depend on teacher's voluntary commitment.

Despite the number of contract specifications that impact the school's improvement plans, District administrators reported evidence of an improved climate between the school and its Teachers' Association. According to District administrators, the number of grievances reported to the District has declined dramatically since the arrival of the new Principal, which was concurrent with the second Panel Review. The Principal's solicitation of the state teachers union to offer professional training in differentiated instruction was described as 'extraordinary' by the Superintendent, given the previously antagonistic relationship that existed between administrators and staff members. The implication of the improving relationship is that the staff and school leaders are working concurrently toward common goals rather than in opposition to one another. This inference is confirmed by conversations with teachers during the focus groups and individual interviews with the Review Team.

The Review Team identified one additional factor that is likely to have had a negative impact on the school's implementation of its improvement plan. From comments provided by teachers, staff, students and parents, communication both within the building and between the school and parents is inadequate to support the school-wide efforts required for long term improvement at Kuss. Parents complained that they receive little information about school events, programs or student performance. Parents in the focus group were unfamiliar with the school's improvement efforts or the specific strategies expected to enhance student achievement. Students decried the loss of their newspaper, citing its discontinuation as another example of the loss of programs that are student-focused. Staff members indicated their lack of awareness of activities, celebrations and special events among clusters other than their own, and teachers not assigned to clusters feel discounted when school-wide activities are planned or implemented. As currently designed, the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) serves as the conduit for information on school improvement efforts, but their communications do not always include corollary events or activities that may not be directly linked to the improvement plan.

The absence of a reliable, comprehensive system to inform all school stakeholders about plans and practices related to the school's improvement plan suggests to the Review Team that the school has not been able to take advantage of the collective efforts of a unified community. Examples of disparate efforts include the distinct goals defined by each cluster group and the inconsistencies in the discipline system as implemented by each teaching team. The failure of

the school to engage parents actively in the school's improvement represents a missed opportunity, in the view of the Team, which may be a factor contributing to the school's irregular performance on the MCAS tests over the past two years.

KEY QUESTION 4: Is there currently a sound plan in place to guide continued improvement in student performance?

As a result of their participation in the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) process sponsored by the MA Department of Education, a team of Kuss staff members has put together the beginnings of a new improvement plan for mathematics and a plan for English language arts that is greatly improved from the 2001- 2003 SIP. At the time of the Follow-up Review, the Kuss PIM team had not completed a few essential components of its plan, but appeared well on its way to completing the plan in the near future.

The Kuss PIM team relied on MCAS and Terra Nova analyses to identify areas of greatest weakness in student knowledge and skill. Results of District benchmark tests were used where available to further refine the identification of learning gaps. In addition to aggregate scores and results disaggregated by student subgroup, the DOE provided Kuss planners with detailed item analyses, graphs of student responses by item difficulty and type, and comparisons of Kuss responses with those of other students in the district and across the state.

Similar to past planning efforts, the Kuss PIM team did not have reliable program implementation information on which to base its planning decisions. As indicated in previous sections of this report, the school does not have systems in place to monitor the quality of implementation of its new math and literacy programs and has not been able to link changes in student performance with adjustments to its curriculum. Since the school relies primarily on yearly standardized assessments to judge the effectiveness of its work, Kuss teachers and administrators cannot determine with certainty which changes, if any, have had a positive impact on student achievement. Without accurate information about instructional practices throughout the school, sorted by student subgroup and content area, the PIM team's selection of strategies to improve student achievement is hampered.

The PIM team's analysis of the data available to it revealed weaknesses in the same general areas and standards as were identified for the earlier SIP, but the learning objectives in the PIM plan are much more precise. For example, where the original plan listed a general goal "to improve students' independent reading and critical thinking skills," the Kuss PIM plan lists seven specific student learning objectives, clearly describing where student learning is lacking ("All students will be able to cite specific examples from the selection to support their answers.") The new set of learning objectives are easy to track by examining student work samples throughout the year, rather than relying on the belated results of standardized assessments to monitor progress. The Kuss PIM mathematics learning objectives are similarly specific in identifying observable and measurable learning tasks that are directly linked to evidence from previous assessment results. In the judgment of the Review Team, the Kuss PIM *2003-2004 School Improvement Plan* has accurately identified gaps in student learning based on a careful and thorough analysis of student test results.

Another positive attribute of the Kuss PIM plan is its focus on teaching and learning targets. Where the initial SIP emphasized professional development to enhance teachers' skills, the new PIM plan defines a number of specific strategies that reflect implementation of the new strategies in the classroom. In the Review Team's judgment, the PIM plan moves in a strong positive direction by defining many strategies more clearly focused on the activities in classrooms. There remain some strategies that describe teacher learning tasks ("Train all staff members in the use of Word Walls . . .") rather than listing observable classroom instructional practices, but overall the new plan directs its focus much more intently on teaching and learning.

Still absent from the new plan, in part because the PIM team has yet to finish its work, are systems to monitor whether the defined strategies are being implemented across the school. For example, math instructional change objective 1.4 declares, "Teachers will be facilitators of the inquiry process by providing opportunities for students to solve problems." The Review Team agrees this is a praiseworthy target, but there is no plan yet defined to identify who will track whether teachers are meeting that objective and with what degree of skill. Further, there is no description of how the impact of this instructional approach on student achievement will be measured. The Review Team is unable to make a judgment on the usefulness of the PIM plan as long as these two key elements are absent.

The Kuss PIM plan had the advantage of involving a small but representative group of staff members. The nine member core team includes a subset of the Instructional Leadership Team, along with the Principal, the Turning Points coach, a district representative and the School Support Specialist for Fall River. According to reports from teachers and staff members, the PIM team reports its progress to the full ILT, who represent each of the cluster teams. The ILT members provide progress reports to their cluster teachers, keeping the full staff aware of the work being conducted to construct the new improvement plan. Monthly faculty meetings and release days are reportedly used for more detailed whole-school reports of the PIM team's work. Teachers interviewed in cluster groups and individually indicated that they feel well informed about the school's improvement planning efforts.

The Follow-up Review Panel concluded that the Kuss PIM plan holds promise for leading the school toward more focused, reliable improvement in teaching which may lead to improved student achievement. With the addition of regular and systematic oversight of the implementation of the improvement strategies and regular and frequent assessment of the impact of the changes on student attainment, the plan can be a worthwhile guide for improvement. The Panel also concluded that the support of the PIM process has been an essential element in helping the school reach its current level of sophistication in planning. It is unclear whether the District or school alone could prepare the extensive analyses of student performance information which forms the basis of the Kuss PIM plan.

KEY QUESTION 5: Are the conditions in place to sustain the gains achieved and support continued improvement in student performance?

In the judgment of the Review Team, a number of conditions must remain in place to sustain the improvement efforts at Kuss Middle School: (1) continued District support for materials and personnel; (2) stability among the staff and school administrators; (3) continued professional development for both administrators and faculty focused on the effective implementation of improvement strategies; and (4) maintenance of the positive professional climate that characterizes the school at the time of the review.

District support for Kuss Middle School includes the work of the Curriculum Directors to coordinate curriculum implementation and track the pacing of content coverage. The District also provides the materials associated with the new curriculum programs in mathematics and literacy. The allocation of district Title I funds to provide writing and mathematics specialists for the school is thought to have had some positive impact on student performance, and their continued presence is likely to support continued improvement. The District can enhance its support if Curriculum Directors could take on a role in evaluating the quality of implementation of new or revised academic efforts, requiring their more frequent presence in classrooms during the school day. Oversight and monitoring of the delivery of Title I services to students in need of remediation rather than use of Title I personnel to serve quasi-administrative functions is an additional district support that could advance the improvement work at Kuss.

Kuss Middle School has experienced high rates of turnover among staff and administrators over the past few years. While the Principal has remained for three years, the Vice Principals are both new to the school this year. Their role in oversight and implementation of improvement efforts is critical, but has been overridden by discipline responsibilities. A stable and more experienced administration will help maintain and expand the work the school has begun. Staff turnover during the past year was triggered by District budget shortfalls. While financial stability is stronger, district-level fiscal resources are still tenuous, but should not result in the same dramatic changes as previously. As far as could be determined, the school has few programs in place to retain current staff. School improvement efforts could be compromised if staff trained over the course of this year decides to depart for other schools or districts.

Teachers claimed that the numerous professional development opportunities available this year have been invaluable in helping them implement the new math and literacy programs. Continued and sustained consultant support for these programs is essential in order for teachers to build confidence and competence with the improved teaching skills.

The Review Team concluded that a key condition in the school's improvement efforts has been the commitment of the faculty to learning new strategies and changing practices that are identified as unproductive. Teachers were engaged and enthusiastic in cluster group and individual interviews when describing their efforts at change. From the information gathered during the visit, new teachers as well as experienced ones participate in the Turning Points tasks to assess their own practice and to adapt improved strategies to fit their students' needs. The professional staff at Kuss exhibits an eagerness to become more proficient instructionally. While class visits conducted during the review suggest that there is still a need for improvement in diversifying classroom activities, the positive attitude among the staff toward their change process lends confidence that progress can be made.

Central to the ability of Kuss Middle School to implement and sustain its improvement plan is the development of effective instructional oversight at the school. The school has shown significant gains in its ability to identify instructional factors that are likely to effect student learning, but there is no system in place or designed for future use to gather reliable information about changes in those practices or to determine if changes in practices have a positive impact on student achievement. Until more structured procedures are put into place to assure effective use of best practices, continued improvement at Kuss will be uncertain. The presence of other conditions will not assure positive change without targeted attention to the quality of instruction.

CONCLUSION

While Kuss Middle School students have demonstrated modest positive trends in achievement over the two years of the school's improvement efforts, the rate of gains in achievement and the distribution of those gains among all student groups is less than will be needed to meet future performance targets. Many of the strategies listed in the school's original SIP approved in 2001 have been adopted, but there has not been systematic assessment of the quality of implementation or of the impact of the initiatives on student achievement, beyond changes in yearly MCAS and Terra Nova scores. Responsibility for oversight of the changes that were intended to enhance student learning is distributed widely and has not been coordinated in a way that can reliably inform judgments about which have contributed to positive change.

The Kuss PIM team and the improvement document they are constructing holds promise for providing the school with a useful tool for accelerating the pace of student achievement, but is not yet sufficiently complete to allow a prediction to be made for its success. It lacks a clear strategy to monitor the nature and quality of classroom instructional change and to track the impact of change on student achievement across the short and long term.

In the Panel's judgment, the challenge to Kuss faculty and administrators is to sustain over time those elements that have contributed to the improved professional climate and opportunities for regular and consistent professional support during the implementation of new programs and practices. Fall River School District, like every Massachusetts school district, is facing significant budget constraints that will require choices to be made on the allocation of resources. The students at Kuss Middle School will be directly affected by the choices made at the district level to continue to support the improvement strategies that have led to positive change at the school. Improved communication within and beyond the school to enlist the active support of parents, students, teachers, administrators and central office staff in the specific efforts shown to have a positive impact would enhance the likelihood of the school's continuing growth.

**APPENDIX A
Team Members**

Dr. Karen Laba, Team Leader, SchoolWorks Project Manager, Beverly, MA.

William Wibel, Team Member, Consultant in leadership, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA.

Nancy Mrzyglod, Team Member, Consultant in curriculum and instruction, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA.

Dolores Fitzgerald, Team Member, Consultant in leadership and evaluation, MA Office of Educational Quality and Accountability, Boston, MA.

APPENDIX B
TWO YEAR FOLLOW-UP REVIEW SCHEDULE
Detailed Schedule for School Site Visit
Matthew Kuss Middle School, Fall River, MA May 27-29, 2003

Day 1: Tuesday, May 27, 2003
Team meeting at the Hampton Inn, Westport, MA

10:00 – 10:30	Debriefing and review folders
10:30 – 12:00	Key Question #1 Summarize MCAS/Stanford 9 Data
12:00 – 12:30	Break/Working Lunch
12:30 – 1:00	Key Question #2 Summarize and draft key statements on the School Improvement Plan
1:00 – 2:30	Key Question #3: Implementation Work on summary maps Develop interview questions for all focus groups/prioritize questions
2:30 – 3:00	Prepare for interviewing with the Superintendent/Assistant Superintendent Refine interview questions
3:00 – 4:00	Interview with Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent
4:00 – 6:00	Debriefing Develop interview questions for Day 1

May 28, 2003
Day 1 On-site Schedule
All activities take place in the school

8:00—9:00	Panelists meet with the principal..
9:00—10:00.	Panelists meet with Group I: The school's Leadership Team
10:00—11:00.	Panelists meet with Group 2: The school's curriculum and instruction leadership team and members of the school site council.
11:00—1:00.	Panelists meet to discuss findings so far and to plan the remainder of the day (working lunch). Panelists use time as needed to analyze findings and to gather more information; panelists may conduct an informal walk through with a focus on school culture and climate for learning.
1:00—3:00.	Panelists meet with teachers in focus groups.

	PANELIST A and PANELIST B	PANELIST C and PANELIST D
<i>1:00-1:30</i>	TEACHER FOCUS GROUP #1	TEACHER FOCUS GROUP #2
<i>1:30-2:00</i>	TEACHER FOCUS GROUP #3	TEACHER FOCUS GROUP #4
<i>2:00-2:30</i>	TEACHER FOCUS GROUP #5	TEACHER FOCUS GROUP #6

2:30-3:00 Panelists meet with parents and students in focus groups.

	PANELIST A	PANELIST B	PANELIST C	PANELIST D
2:30 - 3:00	PARENT FOCUS GROUP #1	PARENT FOCUS GROUP #2	STUDENT FOCUS GROUP #1	STUDENT FOCUS GROUP #2

3:00—5:00 Panelists synthesize information, further define findings, prepare questions, and develop a team strategy for second day of the on-site visit.

May 29, 2003
Day 2 On-site Schedule
All activities take place in the school

7:30—8:00 a.m. Panelists meet with the principal for follow-up questions

8:00—8:30 a.m. Panelists visit classrooms and interview teachers.*

	PANELIST A	PANELIST B	PANELIST C	PANELIST D
8:00-8:30	Observe teacher 1	Observe teacher 2	Observe teacher 3	Observe teacher 4
8:30-9:00	Interview teacher 1	Interview teacher 2	Interview teacher 3	Interview teacher 4
9:00-9:30	Observe teacher 5	Observe teacher 6	Observe teacher 7	Observe teacher 8
9:30-10:00	Interview teacher 5	Interview teacher 6	Interview teacher 7	Interview teacher 8
10:00-10:30	Observe teacher 9	Observe teacher 10	Observe teacher 11	Observe teacher 12
10:30-11:00	Interview teacher 9	Interview teacher 10	Interview teacher 11	Interview teacher 12

11:00—1:00.

Panelists meet to discuss findings so far and to plan the remainder of the day (working lunch). Panelists use time as needed to analyze findings and to gather more information.

1:00—2:00.

Team structured time. Panelists will identify any gaps in the evidence collected and may request additional information from the principal in the form of documents, meetings with classroom teachers, curriculum facilitators, content-area specialists, grade-level instructors, or other specific individuals or groups who can respond to questions relevant to the panel review protocol.

	PANELIST A	PANELIST B	PANELIST C	PANELIST D
1:00 - 2:00				

2:00—2:30 p.m. Closing meeting with the principal to discuss next steps (all panelists are present)

2:30—5:00 p.m. Panelists deliberate and form conclusions.

*Instructions for classroom observations, teacher interviews, and focus groups

Please inform all school faculty and students that Review Panel members will be visiting a cross-section of classrooms during the site visit. The selection of classrooms will be determined mutually by the Panel Review Coordinator and the Principal using the staff directory information provided by the school. All faculty members are asked to be prepared to accommodate a visitor on the morning of the site visit. Panel members will make every effort to minimize the disruption of planned classroom activities.

1. Observations Each panelist will observe three class lessons (for a total of 12 classes observed overall) in order to obtain a representative sample of the school’s individual classrooms. The purpose of the classroom observation is to judge the quality of the learning environment, which is a critical aspect of the school’s overall conditions, and a determinant in whether or not the school will be able to successfully implement its improvement plan. The learning environment includes:
 - The physical setting—space, lighting, size, classroom temperature, etc.,
 - The classroom organization—desk arrangement, resources available to students, orderliness, etc.,
 - The level of the teacher’s preparation for instruction; the students’ readiness for learning
 - The level of the teacher’s expectation for student learning and performance
 - The interaction between teacher and students—the students’ level of engagement or withdrawal.
 - The level and quality of instructional practice in the school (Panelists are not evaluating individual teachers).

2. Individual Teacher Interviews The purpose of the teacher interview that follows the observation is to:
 - Clarify the evaluator’s impressions of the classroom dynamic and learning environment
 - Determine what the teacher considers to be the chief learning needs of students across the school and within his or her classroom
 - Determine the teacher’s understanding of the school’s plan to address those needs and to improve student performance
 - Determine the teacher’s role in the overall mission and improvement plan of the school

3. Teacher Focus Groups The purpose of the teacher focus groups is to:
 - Determine what each teacher considers to be the chief learning needs of students across the school and within his or her classroom
 - Determine each teacher’s understanding of the school’s plan to address those needs and to improve student performance
 - Determine each teacher’s role in the overall mission and improvement plan of the school