

5/25/05

REPORT OF TWO YEAR FOLLOW UP REVIEW

Office of Educational Quality and Accountability

Academy Middle School

Fitchburg Public Schools

Executive Summary

The Academy Middle School (AMS) has shown improvement in student performance during the period under review. Curriculum development and lesson planning is systematic and grounded in analysis of student performance data. Lesson planning is tied to student performance standards and Massachusetts curriculum frameworks. Administrators routinely monitor plan books and provide feedback to teachers. Teachers maintain portfolios of all lessons.

However, math achievement results are not satisfactory. Students in special education and LEP subgroups are not making significant achievement gains, and the Connected Math Program (CMP) is being reviewed for possible replacement. While the ELA curriculum is generating improved student performance, results remain below state average.

The AMS has implemented its State Board of Education approved improvement plan to a significant extent. School leaders are trained in the Program Improvement Mapping (PIM) process, and have maintained a systematic process of identifying data-driven content and student learning goals along with instructional strategies and benchmarks of improved performance. All four major math goals and 23 instructional change objectives have been implemented, most fully, some partially. Similarly, the two major ELA goals and eight instructional change objectives have been implemented, most fully, some partially. Implementation of the math improvement plan is hampered by the lack of a district-wide math coordinator. A math coach periodically facilitates coordination between teams. The selected textbook does not meet with school-wide approval and is deemed by teachers and parents as “not parent friendly.”

The Panel found changes in circumstances in the school and district which have contributed to the school’s ability to implement their plan, as well as changes that have impeded implementation. For example, the school administration has adopted a tougher tardiness policy that calls for automatic detention without a valid excuse for the infraction. Students are considered absent if they do not arrive at school by 11:00 A.M. The principal reported that the incidence of tardiness has decreased this year to date by 1000 infractions compared to this time last year.

Teachers and parents report significantly improved student discipline. The school is clean and orderly and the climate is relaxed, friendly, and respectful of all. In general, the school climate is conducive to productive learning. The panel did note that the rate of suspensions for minority children remains high. For Hispanics, it is nearly double the percentage of their white counterparts and, while smaller in actual number, the rate of suspensions of African American students is nearly triple that of white students. This apparent lack of awareness of this data by

school administrators, suggests that the school may not be sufficiently aware of minority student needs regarding intervention and educational support.

The school has experienced numerous changes in recent years. In addition to its formation as a middle school in 2000, the principal overseeing that transition left the district in 2004. An interim principal, who is scheduled to retire in September 2005, was relocated to AMS from the high school with the specific charge to guide AMS through the review process. Over the same period of time, the school lost three reading teacher positions, and gained four of six new math teachers. The district is scheduled for another restructuring to realign two of the district's three middle schools (including AMS) so that all three will include grades 5-8 effective September 2005. The panel is concerned for the potential negative impact on student performance progress with so many changes in such a short period of time.

A sound plan is currently in place to guide continued improvements in student performance. The current plan is an extension of the former DOE approved plan. While the school's efforts have yielded some gains in student performance, much more needs to be accomplished. A solid foundation has been laid upon which future planning and implementation strategies may be built. Curriculum and instructional targets are responsive to MCAS student performance data and provide a logical sequence of next steps.

The plan, however, does not include provisions for the impending restructuring to be implemented in September, 2005. Much of the progress to date appears to be the result of the current principal and assistant principal's effective leadership in curriculum planning and instructional supervision while promoting a climate of support and accountability. The current faculty appears motivated and focused on enhancing student performance. If significant changes in the present complement of administrators, faculty, students, and parents result from the impending reorganization without careful planning, continued improvements might be impeded.

Current conditions sustain the gains achieved and support continued improvement in student performance. The staff is focused and trained in data-driven instruction. The Planning and Improvement Mapping process (PIM) is in place and familiar to all staff. Strategies for providing supervision, evaluation and accountability support to teachers are operational and have been institutionalized. Stakeholders (administrators, teachers, parents, and students) appear unified with regard to the improvement of student performance. The school has established a positive culture of shared values where support for student achievement is central.

The school needs to stabilize future changes in structure and staffing and focus its energies on identified needs particularly in math and the support of special education and LEP students. An additional grant award of \$350,000 to the district for the development of math curriculum and instruction comes at an opportune time.

Priority Findings

- I.** The Academy Middle School has shown improvement in student performance. However, gains in math are significantly less than in ELA. Although Cycle III data for ELA earned an improvement rating of “Moderate” and “Above Target,” students remain below state average in both areas of MCAS testing.
- At grade 7, ELA shows a trend of progress from 2001 to 2004. The percentage of students scoring in the warning category dropped from 41% to 15% while the percentage of students scoring in the proficient and advanced categories increased from 17% to 40%.
 - 8th grade math scores reflected some progress, although that progress is “very low” and the improvement is labeled “below target” according to the Cycle III accountability report.
 - For 2004, the major subgroup scores for special needs and LEP students remained very low. In ELA, 90% of special education students and 80% of LEP students scored below proficient. In math, 94% of special education students and 91% of LEP students scored below proficient.
- II.** The Academy Middle School has significantly implemented its State Board of Education approved improvement plan.
- All 4 major Math goals and 23 instructional change objectives have been partially or fully implemented over the past two years. Similarly, the two major ELA goals and eight instructional change objectives have seen the same rates of implementation.
 - Implementation of the math improvement plan has been hampered by the lack of a district-wide math coordinator.
 - Curriculum development and lesson planning are systemic and grounded in analysis of student performance data. Lesson planning is tied to student performance standards and state curriculum frameworks. Administrators routinely monitor plan books and provide verbal and written feedback to teachers. Teachers maintain portfolios of all lessons.
 - The current level of implementation of the Math curriculum has failed to produce satisfactory results.
 - Observed classroom instruction revealed a variety of method and engaged students in active learning. This represents a change since the fact-finding team visit when classroom instruction was universally poor..

III. The Panel found changes in conditions and circumstances in the school and district which have contributed to and/or impeded the school's ability to implement their plan.

- The school administration has adopted a tougher tardiness policy that appears to have improved student tardiness (1000 fewer instances compared to the same period last year).
- The district has adopted a student promotions policy designed to minimize promotion of students who lack requisite skills.
- Student discipline has improved since 2000. School administrators, especially the building assistant principal, are credited.
- School suspension rates are declining yet remain at three times the state average. While Hispanic students comprise 42% of the student population and white students 44%, the rate of suspensions for Hispanic students is twice the suspension rate for white students.
- District-wide budget reductions of 6 million dollars over the last three years have resulted in loss of critical instructional positions especially in reading. Insufficient funding is also blamed for the poor condition of technology resources.
- The building is clean and orderly and the climate is relaxed, friendly, and respectful. In general, the school climate is conducive to productive learning.
- The school has experienced a significant number of staffing changes including the loss of three reading positions, the hiring of four of six math teachers within the last 3 years, and the assignment of an interim principal for 2004-2005 who will retire in September 2005. In addition, the school will be restructured to a 5-8 school in the fall of 2005. The combined effect of these extreme changes could impede student performance improvements.

IV. A sound plan is currently in place to guide continued improvements in student performance.

- The current plan builds upon the DOE approved plan and reflects the same solid PIM process planning.
- The Panel perceives that a solid foundation has been established upon which future planning and implementation strategies may be built
- The plan does not include provisions for the impending restructuring of AMS from a grade 7/8 building in September 2005.
- The latest reorganization does not appear to have been sufficiently researched or planned. The school committee dismissed other alternatives (such as a Pre-K-8 restructuring) without serious investigation.
- Significant administrative, faculty, student and parent changes will need support during the restructuring process to sustain current, and promote future, improvements.

V. Conditions are in place to sustain gains achieved and support continued improvement in student performance.

- The staff is focused and trained in data-driven instruction. The Performance Improvement Mapping process (PIM) is in place and familiar to all administrators and faculty.
- Strategies for supervision, evaluation and accountability support for teachers are operational and have been institutionalized.
- All stakeholders (administrators, teachers, parents, and students) are unified and committed with regard to the improvement of student performance.
- The school has established a positive culture of shared values where support for student achievement is central.
- Conditions could change with the impending restructuring plan.

Two Year Follow-Up Review Process

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 identified as in need of improvement is underperforming and in need of state guidance to improve student performance. Schools declared to be underperforming are required to participate in a Fact Finding Review, to assist 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 Academy Middle School developed such a plan, and the Commissioner and Board of Education accepted the plan on January 28, 2003. The district is required to direct the implementation of this plan, and within two years, the school must demonstrate significant improvement.

The Underperforming 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 underperformance at the Academy Middle School. The Follow-Up Review was conducted on April 7th and 8th, 2005.

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 available evidence. 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 the Academy 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.

Academy Middle School Profile

The district was restructured in the summer of 2000 to relieve overcrowding in several elementary schools. As a result, the Academy Middle School was formed. Academy Middle School enrolls 571 students in grades 7 & 8 and is housed in the former Fitchburg High School. The student population of AMS is drawn from the center of Fitchburg and reflects the community it serves. The student population is comprised of 45% white students, 42% Hispanic students, 7% Asian students, 6% Black students, and one Native American student. Sixteen percent of AMS students receive special education services and 60% are considered to be from low-income families. Thirty-eight percent of students consider English their second language and 36% are considered to be limited English proficient (LEP).

The student attendance rate for 2004 was 93.8%, slightly below the state average of 94.2% but meeting AYP standards. The retention rate in 2004 was 3.8%, also slightly above the state average of 2.6%. The in-school suspension rate is 12.5% compared to the state average of 4.5%. The out-of-school suspension rate was 18.7% as compared to the state average of 6.1%. Academy Middle School's exclusion rate was 2.9% as compared to the state average of 2.0%.

Documentation from the district provides a profile of the school staff (250 words in length) including: number of administrators, teachers, support staff; certification status of the teaching faculty; student-teacher ratio, and other relevant information that indicates qualities and characteristics of the staff.

MCAS Results

GRADE 7 ELA

MCAS testing for students at the Academy Middle School consists of grade 7 English Language Arts (ELA) and Grade 8 Math. In ELA, AMS demonstrated continuous progress over the 2001-2004 testing cycles. Regular education students scored as follows:

	Advanced	State	Proficient	State	Needs Improvement	State	Warning	State
2004	8	(11)	51	(67)	38	(19)	3	(2)
2003	1		55		39		5	
2002	1		39		41		19	
2001	0		22		51		27	

The percentage of proficient (P) steadily increased from 22% to 51% and from 0% to 8% in the Advanced (A) category over the four-year period. Students scoring in the Warning (W) and Needs Improvement categories steadily declined from 27% to 3% (W) and 51% to 38% (NI) over the same four-year period.

The state average for 2004 is included in parentheses to show that despite steady gains in ELA results, AMS continues to score significantly below state average (for example, there are twice as many students --38% vs. 19% -- in the Needs Improvement category).

Special Education and LEP students did not fare as well as the overall population. While reflecting some degree of improvement, the changes in these groups' scores appear small:

	Special Education				Limited English Proficient			
	A	P	NI	W	A	P	NI	W
2004	0	10	47	43	0	20	63	17
2003	2	16	47	35	0	29	49	22
2002	0	9	34	56				
2001	0	5	19	77				

Special Education students in the Warning/Needs Improvement categories moved from 96% (2001) to 90% (2004). LEP students' scores reflect a worsening trend over the two years for which data is available, with 71% scoring below proficient in 2003, and 80 % below proficient in 2004.

GRADE 8 MATH

The trends toward improvement are scattered and slight. For all students, scores improved from 87% in Warning/Needs Improvement in 2001 to 82% in Warning/Needs Improvement in 2004.

Scores for the LEP subgroup show little improvement while the Special Education subgroup reflects downward or worsening trend:

	All Students				Regular Education			
	A	P	NI	W	A	P	NI	W
2004	6 (13)	12 (26)	28 (32)	54 (29)	11 (16)	16 (31)	36 (34)	36 (19)
2003	3	11	29	57	1	55	39	5
2002	1	10	28	61	1	12	34	54
2001	3	10	27	60	0	45	43	12

State averages for 2004 are in parentheses for comparative purposes. As was the case in ELA, the percentage of AMS regular education students scoring in the Warning category is nearly twice the state average -- 36% vs 19%).

	Special Education				Limited English Proficient			
	A	P	NI	W	A	P	NI	W
2004	2 (2)	4 (8)	13 (26)	81 (64)	0 (4)	9 (8)	23 (24)	68 (64)
2003	0	2	21	77	0	1	16	83
2002								
2001								

When compared, 17% more AMS Special Education students scored in the Warning category than the state average. However, the LEP students at AMS score right around the state average across the board in Math. 2004 State average scores for Special Education and Limited English Proficient students appear above in parentheses for comparison purposes.

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

The panel found that, overall, the school has shown recent improvement in student performance in grade 7 English Language Arts (ELA) and grade 8 Math. In the school’s 03-04 MCAS results in ELA, Academy Middle School reduced its percentage of students in the needs improvement and warning categories from 54% to 41% while the percentage of students in the proficient and advanced categories increased from 56% to 59%. MCAS scores for special education students indicated 82% in the needs improvement/warning category in 2003 increasing to 90% in 2004. Over the four years 2001 – 2004, however, the percentage of special education students in the needs improvement/warning categories reduced from 96% - 90%. LEP students’ scores reflect a downward trend over the two years for which data is available, with 71% scoring below proficient in 2003, and 80 % below proficient in 2004. The Cycle III Performance rating in ELA was “moderate” and the Improvement rating “above target.”

In the school's 03-04 MCAS results in Math, Academy Middle School, reduced the percentage of students performing below proficient (W/NI) slightly from 86% in 2003 to 82% in 2004. This slight improvement resulted in a Cycle III performance rating of "very low" (CPI of 47.6) and an improvement rating of "improved – below target." Special Education students scored 98% in Warning/Needs Improvement in 2003 decreasing to 94% in 2004 and LEP students scored 99% in Warning/Needs Improvement in 2003 decreasing to 91% in 2004.

The percentage of students chronically absent declined from 2002-2004, but the overall rate of student attendance remained below state average. The percentage of students suspended significantly declined during the same period. However, while the enrolled student body was reported as 44% white and 42% Hispanic, the rate of suspensions (both in-school and out-of-school) of Hispanic students was nearly twice that of white students (9% whites to 17.6% Hispanic). Teachers and administrators presented with this data appeared surprised and, while none could offer an explanation, all offered hypotheses. Their speculations suggested a pattern of perceptions and beliefs about the social and cultural context of Hispanic students (poverty, single-parent homes, community violence, gangs, etc.) and perceived negative impact on behaviors in school. A cultural stereotype that includes low expectations exists at the school, although this is unacknowledged and may be unintended.

Low expectations for student performance were also noted during interviews with the principal and superintendent who agreed that "there is no hope of grade 7 and grade 8 making AYP under the present [school] configuration." While this statement was primarily intended to explain and reinforce the district administration's rationale for the decision to reorganize all three middle schools to grades 5-8 for fall 2005, the panel noted the lack of expectation for student performance. Further, this theme was evident again in teacher and administrator responses to panel questions regarding the continued failure of special education students to perform well on MCAS. From interviews with teachers and administrators, the prevalent belief was expressed that "realistically," the special education students had "plateaued" and nothing more could be done.

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

The school improvement plan as approved by the State Board of Education has been substantially implemented. The panel received an annotated copy of the original document which provided status information ('implemented', 'partially implemented' or 'not implemented') together with anecdotal written evidence to justify the assessment designations. All thirty SIP objectives were labeled as either "implemented" (26) or "partially implemented" (4). The panel confirmed the accuracy of this report through interviews (administrators, teachers, and parents); direct observations of instruction; and inspection of documents (teacher portfolios, lesson plans, and student/parent and teacher handbooks).

From the inspection of teacher plan books, all panel members noted the direct reference to SIP and Curriculum Framework objectives. Individuals interviewed (including parents) were familiar with the SIP objectives and reported participating in their development. The panel noted

that a school-wide “Geometry Month” strategy reflective of the goals of the SIP, had been successfully implemented. All staff interviewed confirmed participation in the PIM training and familiarity with the improvement process. The school has an established child study team to support student issues. The school has implemented a “team teaching” model to enhance instructional effectiveness and integration of LEP students into mainstream classrooms. However, there has been no formal assessment of the ELL /subject-area teacher team strategy. A new district promotion policy was instituted in response to concerns that students without requisite skills had been “promoted” into the middle school unprepared for academic success. To address the concerns regarding high rates of tardiness, a new policy was instituted for the 2004-2005 school year. This policy mandates automatic detention for any student failing to arrive on time who is not otherwise excused for legitimate reasons. Despite the fact that the school principal and assistant principal report the instances of tardiness have been reduced by 1,000 compared to the same period last year, both the tardiness and attendance rates continue to exceed state averages.

During interviews, the faculty and administration expressed much satisfaction that their plan is “moving in the right direction.” The principal stated: “We have had remarkable success given budget cuts, increases in minority populations and the high percentage of poverty.” While acknowledging some improvement for the period of this review, overall student performance remains significantly below state average. Regarding the specific needs of the Hispanic and Special Education subgroups, the school faculty and administration are unaware of low teacher expectations of these groups as a cause of under performance and there is a worry that this might perpetuate low student achievement. While the school is implementing the approved SIP to a substantial degree, these are significant issues not currently addressed within the plan.

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? YES.

Organizational Structure

With the construction of a new high school, the Academy Middle School was created in 2000 as part of a district-wide reorganization of grades. In the fall of 2005, the district will implement yet another school committee approved restructuring of middle schools to serve grades 5-8. While this change appears to hold wide support among administrators, teachers, and parents, the decision appears to be based largely on an unsubstantiated belief that students will be better served by remaining in one school for a longer period of time. Administrators and teachers express the opinion that with increased student contact, there will be opportunities to establish continuity of curriculum and instruction. By beginning instruction and instituting interventions with students earlier the school believes it will positively impact student performance.. Parents reported that they anticipate student attendance at a four year middle school will lead to stronger, and look forward to more continuous parent involvement. In separate interviews, the principal and superintendent agreed that the current grade 7 and 8 configuration is an impediment to the school meeting its AYP.

Panel members noted that this is the second large-scale reorganization within five years. When combined with other major staffing changes including the superintendent’s retirement (June,

2005); the interim principal's appointment (August 2004) and retirement (June 2005); the hiring of a reading director (March 2005); and the reduction of two reading teacher positions due to a combination of budget cuts and staff separation, the amount of change and instability is a concern. In addition, the panel noted that the restructuring decision appears to have little or no grounding in current research regarding either the organization of schools serving early adolescents or other effective middle school models. Examination of school committee minutes revealed that discussion of the reorganization centered on the notion that more time spent in one building is better than frequent movement between two or more buildings. While committee members were informed, "research is not conclusive but favors the K-8 configuration based on fewer transitions and higher relationships," there exists no evidence that the district had considered or researched the K-8 model as an alternative to the 5-8 model.

Curriculum & Instruction

The school utilizes a standard middle school model with teachers assigned to five-member teaching teams. Each team shares a physical cluster of classrooms and a schedule of classes that includes a daily common team planning time. On a bi-weekly basis, teams meet to coordinate and plan curriculum. With the support of administrators, math coach, Title I and special education teachers, teams have completed curriculum mapping for ELA and math to ensure alignment with state curriculum frameworks and performance standards. Course syllabi have been developed for each subject area by performance and grade levels. This team planning approach has allowed for cross-grade "spiraling" of curriculum and acquisition of appropriate materials. Teaming has also enabled schedule adjustments to fit instructional needs. For example, when it became clear to teachers that the new math program would require 60-minute instructional periods to be taught properly, the schedule was adjusted accordingly. Teachers maintain weekly lesson plan books that specify curriculum and framework goals for each day's lessons. Lesson plans are collected and reviewed weekly by the principal and assistant principal who in addition to monitoring the quality of planning provide feedback and comments of support and encouragement to teachers. These same administrators conduct daily "Walk Throughs" to monitor instruction and provide support to teachers and students.

The inclusion model is used to address the needs of special education students. Special education staff work together as "team teachers" within the regular classroom. The ELL teacher is attached to one team that handles all "new-comers." ELL students are provided intensive English language training along with early inclusion for as much of the instructional day as the student is able.

From interviews of teacher cohort groups, the panel noted with few exceptions, a professional culture that was positive, optimistic, enthusiastic, and mutually supportive. Teachers were knowledgeable and conversant about student performance data and reflective in their practice. Teaching teams appear student-focused and passionate about their work.

While a number of assessments are in place for the math program, failure to utilize similar formative assessments in ELA impedes the implementation of the school's SIP as a means of evaluating and monitoring the effectiveness of improvement strategies. Informal and intuitive assessments of teachers are utilized as a substitute for formal assessment strategies. In an interview, the principal indicated the most recent formal assessment of SIP progress was completed in November 2004. When asked how he and the staff know if progress is continuing, he responded: "Teachers believe there are great changes being made." Similarly, classroom teachers appear to rely heavily on informal observations rather than systematic formative assessments to chart the academic progress of students and relative effectiveness of program initiatives.

Due to scheduling anomalies, some class sizes are as high as 27 students with many students reading at the 3rd grade level. The utilization of special education support staff for inclusion services creates large class sizes in the pull out sections. Also noted by the panel is the absence of bilingual special education services. Special education science instruction has shortcomings. This may relate to the relative inexperience of the teacher, who is only provisionally licensed. While the teacher has benefited from the district's formal teacher induction and mentoring program, only one day per year of professional development has been offered for science staff during the period of this review.

The lack of adequate instructional technology resources inhibits the ability of faculty to effectively deliver differentiated and remedial/tutorial instruction. While several teachers reported access to laptop computers and In Focus projectors, most others are woefully under equipped. "I have several computers in my classroom," reported one teacher, "but they are broken." In some instances, personal computers belonging to teachers were in evidence. Teachers reported that the school's computer lab is all but unusable because of old equipment (14 years old) with limited capacity and frequent breakdowns.

Math

Chief among the impeding forces cited by school administration and faculty is the lack of a math coordinator and staffing turnovers resulting in two new teachers hired in 2002 and two others hired in 2004. Four of the six math teachers serve without professional status. The lack of a system-wide coordinator in math inhibits the alignment of mathematics across grade levels and schools. Teachers are, therefore, left to their own devices. The school adopted the Connected Math Program (CMP) in the fall of 2004 but at least five implementation difficulties have emerged. First, while the curriculum is mapped for alignment with the Massachusetts curriculum framework, it is not aligned with a district curriculum. For example, while the grade 8 curriculum provides for exposure to or completion of Algebra I by all students, CMP does not support 8th grade algebra. Second, while the district claims to have offered CMP training, only 2 of 5 teachers at AMS are trained in this new program. A third concern is for uniformity in math instruction as one math teacher has continued (and apparently been allowed) to use the Singapore math program. According to the principal, it is only used "as an adjunct to the basic math

curriculum program, primarily for the model drawing component.” Fourth, while students reported that they routinely receive a significant amount of math homework, teachers noted that the CMP books are not “parent friendly” leaving parents unable to assist their children. Finally, teachers anticipate that students will not be able to complete all eight books included in the grade eight program in one year.

A school-wide effort has been made to create curriculum maps in all subject areas for alignment with the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks. However, in math, curriculum maps were described by teachers as “not quite aligned” with teachers having developed their own checklist system to track goals and pacing of course content. A grade 8 honors math program has been developed to offer Algebra I to advanced students. The growing percentage of students scoring in the advanced level of MCAS (1% in 2002, 3% in 2003 and 6% in 2004) appears to support the success of this curriculum initiative. Panel members also noted that a new “math starters” instructional strategy appears to be yielding positive results in the development of basic math skills.

Administrators referred to a lack of math content knowledge at the teacher level and variance in teacher performance. One of the eighth grade math teachers is not fully licensed and overall the professional development in math offered by the district appeared inadequate. Recognizing their need for professional development, math teachers developed their own in-house training program, including the organization and implementation of a regional math conference.

A district and school level math coordinator has still not been hired. The school administration explains that this is due to budget constraints. The city-funded Math Intervention Teacher is limited to serving 24-25 students per quarter (up to 100 per year) at AMS.

English Language Arts

With teachers working in teams, the Title I teachers were able to support reading within regular classrooms. With the inclusion model, special education staff members were also able to support the reading development of all students. However, the lack of reading teachers on three of five teams has forced all teachers to become de facto reading teachers.

Since only two of five teaching teams include a reading teacher, the panel has concern for the lack of instructional consistency and continuity in reading instruction across all teams. Two reading teacher positions were eliminated as part of budget cuts, a process that cut \$6 million dollars district wide over the past three years.

Professional development has been provided to all teachers in the Six-Trait Writing Rubric and Directed Reading Activities (DRA) - a program that provides students with reading support across the subject areas. DRA training was offered to other content teachers and implementation was noted throughout the panel’s observation of classroom instruction and inspection of lesson planning documents. However, while DRA trained, one science teacher reported that she struggled to teach reading. The Six-Trait Writing Rubric was adopted for use by all teachers after training through a professional development program. The school has limited library resources to support both the reading curriculum and the overall development of student reading skills.

Policies

Chief among the policy concerns expressed by school staff was the district's loose promotional policy that allowed students to be promoted into the middle schools lacking adequate skills to perform the work expected of 7th & 8th grade students. The principal and teachers expressed hope that the reorganization of middle schools to grades 5-8 would significantly reduce this problem since the school staff would have increased opportunity to remediate and support students. In addition, it was reported to the panel that the school committee has approved a new district-wide policy that will tighten promotional requirements.

Supporting the school's SIP goals is an enhanced tardiness and attendance policy that is rigorously enforced. Students tardy to school without an acceptable excuse as described within the policy guidelines, are automatically assigned to detention. According to the policy, students will be deemed absent if they report to school at 11:00 a.m. or later. School administrators report that the instances of student tardiness have decreased by over 1,000 infractions this year compared to the same period last year. Teachers confirm that the policy has made a significant difference in the overall tone of the school. In interview, parents report that they have noticed a significant change in the school atmosphere in the last two years. One parent stated that "while the transition year (2000) was rough, the administration has done a good job and has a good handle on student behavior – now, you can hear a pin drop in this school!" Indeed, the panel observed that during the two days of its site visit, the school appeared orderly, clean, and well under control.

The administrative supervision and support of classroom instruction has been enhanced by the implementation of "walk throughs" by the principal and assistant principal. Principals routinely visit classrooms to observe instruction and engage students in conversation. Brief notes are sent to teachers that generally provide support for work well done and occasionally a suggestion for improvement. Daily announcements at the close of school include words of congratulations for good work observed during the day. These activities are well received and appreciated by faculty as evidenced in interviews. Seven of ten students interviewed reported having a positive rapport with teachers and administrators at the school.

District leadership has received training in the Program Improvement Mapping (PIM) process and is engaged in providing leadership in school improvement. The principal and assistant principal are credited by teachers and parents in making a big difference in the school in their roles as curriculum leaders.

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

A sound plan is in place to guide continued improvement in student performance. However, the school still faces many challenges. While progress has been made in student MCAS results, results in math remain minimal and well below state average. The curriculum has been aligned with the Massachusetts frameworks, and teachers are now directly engaged in performance goal and standards-based instruction supported by tightened administrative supervision and

monitoring, but only time will prove the effectiveness of these developments. AMS is one of two schools in the district to share in a substantial (\$350,000) CSR grant to develop its math program in the 2006 fiscal year.

The school has experienced significant changes in structure, staffing, and leadership in recent years. This will continue unabated next year. Established as a grade 7&8 middle school in the 2000 school year, AMS has seen its principal leave to take a position in another school district in 2004 and will see the current interim principal retire in September of 2005 after just one year of service. The district superintendent is also leaving his post at the end of this year. The school committee decided, effective in September 2005, to restructure two of its middle schools (including AMS) to align them with its third middle school thereby establishing a grade levels 5-8 configuration for all three middle schools. Thus, AMS will once again face upheaval; a redistribution of the students, faculty adjustments, a new principal, and a new superintendent.

Despite the many challenges that lie ahead, the school appears to have laid a strong foundation for enhanced future student success. The current staff functions as a unit with positive collegial spirit. Most appear to have familiarity with the PIM and SIP processes and express optimism for increasing student success. The ELA curriculum appears substantially in place and is already yielding results as reflected in student MCAS testing results. Math, however, is much more problematic. Despite district and school initiatives to date, student performance continues to lag. As the administration and faculty reassess the effectiveness of the newly adopted CMP, student performance results must be enhanced despite administrative changes, school restructuring, and programmatic adjustments.

The future success of significant subgroups is of particular concern: special education students (94% below proficient), limited English proficient (LEP) students (91% below proficient), and racial/ethnic minority (African American & Hispanic) students that experience 2 to 4 times the rate of in and out-of-school suspensions than their white counterparts. Despite a declining trend in student performance for these groups, the panel detected overall satisfaction with the overall progress being made at AMS (“we’re on the same page and moving in the right direction”). School staff must make a continuous effort to remain dissatisfied until all students including these subgroups are making substantial progress towards proficiency. Satisfaction has an insidious way of turning into complacency. Regarding the Hispanic sub group, where suspension is at a very high rate, the panel was uneasy about what appeared as excuse making or stereotyping (deprived or broken homes; abuse at home; no one that cares at home; etc.), that makes such data “understandable” and thus acceptable. The school has not yet found effective ways to communicate consistently with students and families in this sub group, and until it does so the stereotyping and high suspension rates are likely to persist.

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

The panel believes that the conditions are in place to sustain the gains already achieved and support continued improvement in student performance. The faculty and administration have embraced the PIM and SIP processes. Curricular mapping has been accomplished to align the ELA and Math curricula with the state curriculum frameworks. Professional development has

been provided to staff for interpreting and using MCAS data in lesson planning and instructional decision-making. There is evidence that all content teachers have received DRA training to enable the reinforcement of reading skills across the curriculum. The school has adopted the Six Trait Writing Rubric as a uniform approach to enhance writing skills across the curriculum. A well-controlled school environment has been established that is conducive to learning and has won the active support and participation of parents. The school employs a full-time resource officer to follow-up with students and families for attendance and disciplinary issues. The middle school structure has been organized to include all of the major research-based organizational structures known to be effective for early adolescent learners. The AMS is structured into well-organized teams of five teachers who appear to like and respect one another. Teachers demonstrate enthusiasm for their work. Daily planning periods are built into the teaming model to facilitate coordination of curriculum and support for students and their families. While remaining below state average, the school is beginning to demonstrate student performance gains overall. Continued strong leadership, curriculum development and coordination, and enhanced professional development have the potential to facilitate continued progress. The changes in school structure and leadership that lie ahead will present significant challenges to continued progress. A significant support for continued progress will be the \$350,000 grant that the school will share for the development and enhancement of its math program.

CONCLUSION

The challenges presented by student demographics, as well as significant changes in school structure and staffing, has made improvement a moving target at Academy Middle School.

Nonetheless, the school has demonstrated some improvement in student performance as evidenced by annual MCAS data from 2001 to 2004 and the current SIP is sound if lacking detail of the impending structural changes.

In-school student behavior is well controlled. Teacher/student relationships are warm and supportive. Teachers express enthusiasm for their work and are increasingly knowledgeable about the learning needs of students, including MCAS data and its benefit for designing instruction. Teaching teams meet bi-weekly to plan and coordinate the curriculum. Instructional practice is varied and engages students in active learning activities. This reflects an important change from the findings of the fact finding report in 2002.

Significant weaknesses impeding implementation of the school's SIP include: the lack of structure and resources to significantly improve student performance in Mathematics; the residual effects of budget cuts totaling six million dollars over the last three years, including reductions of key instructional personnel; the amount of change experienced in this setting over a relatively brief period including the current plan to restructure middle schools to include grades 5-8 by next fall; and the continued lack of progress for significant special education and LEP subgroups.

Despite this, with the curriculum and instructional initiatives to date and a continuing positive professional culture, the plan in place can sustain and enhance student achievement at the Academy Middle School.

APPENDIX A
Team Members

Mr. Peter Davies, Chair, President, Class Measures Limited
Dr. Nancy Houle, Associate Examiner, Office of Educational Quality and Accountability
Dr. Malcolm L Patterson, Reporting Examiner, Leadership Consultant, Class Measures Limited
Dr. Charles F. Valera, Associate Examiner, Office of Educational Quality and Accountability

APPENDIX B
TWO YEAR FOLLOW-UP REVIEW SCHEDULE
Detailed Schedule for School Site Visit

The times specified on the following schedule may be adjusted slightly to align with the daily schedule and practices of the school being reviewed.

Day 1 on site schedule

All activities take place in the school

- 8:00—9:00* Team members meet with the principal.
- 9:00—10:00.* Team members meet with the district superintendent (and Assistant Superintendent, if appropriate).
- 10:00—11:00.* Team members meet with the school’s curriculum and instruction leadership team and members of the school site council.
- 11:00—1:00.* Team members 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.* Team members meet with teachers in focus groups.

	REVIEWER A and REVIEWER B	REVIEWER C and REVIEWER 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.

	REVIEWER A	REVIEWER B	REVIEWER C	REVIEWER 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.

Day 2 on-site schedule
All activities take place in the school

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

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

	REVIEWER A	REVIEWER B	REVIEWER C	REVIEWER 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
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11:00—1:00. Team members meet to discuss findings so far and to plan the remainder of the day (working lunch). Members use time as needed to analyze findings and to gather more information.

1:00—2:00. Team structured time. Members 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.

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

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

2:30—5:00 p.m. Members 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 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. Team members will make every effort to minimize the disruption of planned classroom activities.

1. Observations Each reviewer 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