

School Panel Review Report Mary E. Curley Middle School Boston Public Schools

Introduction

The purpose of the School Panel Review Process is to assist the Commissioner of Education in determining whether State intervention is needed to guide improvement efforts in schools where students' MCAS performance is critically low and no trend toward improved student performance is evident from MCAS data. Mary E. Curley Middle School met this criterion at the eighth grade and was one of 14 schools selected for panel review in spring, 2003. The panel review was conducted on February 25-26, 2003.

The Review 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 two key questions:

1. Does the school have a sound plan for improving student performance?
2. Are the conditions in place for the successful implementation of the school's improvement plan(s)?

The Panel's responses to the two key questions that defined the scope of its 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 two key questions, as well as school performance data, will be forwarded to the Commissioner of Education for consideration in determining whether the Mary E. Curley Middle School is deemed 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 a sound plan where such conditions at present do not appear to exist. Diagnostic and/or prescriptive intervention, where needed to assist an under-performing school, occurs at the next stage of the school review process.

Mary E. Curley Middle School Profile

Enrollment

The Curley Middle School is one of 20 grade 6-8 middle schools in the Boston Public Schools and serves approximately 790 students. The most recent enrollment data shows that demographic indicators remained relatively stable over the last four years. In 2002, the school reported 59 percent of students as Hispanic, 34 percent Black, 6 percent White, and 1 percent Asian. The percentage of students whose first language is not English has been near 50 percent for the last four years reported, while the percentage of students designated as Limited English Proficient (LEP) has increased from 36 percent in 1999 to 42 percent in 2002. The Curley Middle School is

a school-wide Title I school with 73 percent of students designated as low income and qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch.

The attendance rate at the school has been above 92 percent for the last four years, and the average number of days absent has been at or near 13.5 for three of the last four years. In 2001, the school retained 25 students for a retention rate of 3.5. In the area of exclusions for weapons, assaults, and other offenses, the Curley School had the highest exclusion rate of all middle schools for 2001. The rate of exclusion has been increasing over the last four years reported, from 2.7 (2 students) in 1999 to 5.7 (4 students) in 2000 to 16.7 (12 students) in 2001.

In 2003, 137 of the Curley School students receive special education services in one of the following areas: SAR; learning and adaptive remediation; learning disabled/language needs. Title I services support ESL services for approximately 120 students (15 percent). Language support for non-native English speakers includes Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) services, a self-contained language needs classroom and a literacy based classroom. Ninety students take advantage of Academic Support Services (school day and extended time) programs. Extended time (enrichment and recreational) programs and services serve between 60-90 students, primarily those who have not met the grade level competencies in reading and math.

Staffing

The school staff consists of the principal, assistant principal, two guidance counselors, nurse, librarian, school psychologist, 51 teachers, four long-term substitutes and two teacher aides. Thirteen teachers, or one in four, are either on waiver or are not certified in the areas in which they teach. Just under two thirds of teachers (30) have been at the school for between one and five years, while 16 have been in the building for 11 or more years.

MCAS Overview

Students at the Curley Middle School are tested in grade 6 in mathematics, in grade 7 in English language arts (ELA), and in grade 8 in mathematics. In Cycle II, the school made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in ELA, but not in mathematics.

Student Performance in English Language Arts

In Cycle II, the Curley School received a rating of “Very Low” in ELA due to its proficiency index of 56.6. Its improvement in this content area was deemed “On Target.” Participation rates in the MCAS testing in ELA at the school in Cycle II were 89 percent in 2001 and 96 percent in 2002.

In 2001, 16 percent of all Regular Education students tested in grade 7 in ELA scored proficient, 50 percent were in the Needs Improvement category, and 34 percent in Warning. In 2002, 30 percent of students were proficient, 52 percent scored in the Needs Improvement category, and 19 percent at Warning.

In 2001, there were no proficient Special Education students, 21 percent scored at the Needs Improvement level, and 79 percent were in Warning. In 2002, 35 percent of students in this subgroup were in need of improvement and 65 percent scored at the Warning level.

There were no Limited English Proficient students tested in 2001. In 2002, all LEP students tested scores at the Warning level.

Student Performance in Mathematics

In Cycle II, the Curley School received a performance rating of “Critically Low” in mathematics based on its proficiency index of 29.7. Having made no progress compared to Cycle I, the school received an improvement rating of “No Change.” Participation rates in the mathematics test were 94 percent in 2001 and 98 percent in 2002.

While the performance of Regular Education students at the Curley School improved in Cycle II compared to Cycle I, there remain high proportions of students scoring at the Warning level and very few (less than five percent) proficient. In 1999, only two percent of Regular Education students were proficient, 14 percent in need of improvement, and 83 percent scored in the Warning category. In 2000, three percent of students tested in this group were proficient, seven percent of scores fell in the Needs Improvement category, and 91 percent in Warning. In Cycle II, three percent of students were proficient, 26 percent in need of improvement, and 71 percent scored at the Warning level.

High percentages students (90-100 percent) scoring at the Warning level, and no proficient students have characterized the performance of Special Education students at this school in mathematics over the last four years. Special Education students’ performance in grade 6 math in this content area in Cycle II shows similar trends.

The performance trends of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students at the Curley School have remained steady over the last four years. High proportions (80-100 percent) of students in this subgroup have scored at the Warning level, while no students have been recorded performing at Proficient. The performance of LEP students in grade 6 math in Cycle were relatively similar, 81 and 86 percent of student scored were in Warning in 2001 and 2002, respectively.

PANEL RESPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS

KEY QUESTION 1: DOES THE SCHOOL HAVE A SOUND PLAN FOR IMPROVING STUDENT PERFORMANCE?

The Review Panel for the Mary E. Curley Middle School found that the Whole School Improvement Plan (WSIP) presented an adequate roadmap for change containing multiple initiatives for improving the performance of its students. Following the WSIP template provided by the Boston Public Schools (BPS), the plan frames its content around six improvement essentials that include (1) a concentration on literacy and mathematics, (2) examining student

data and work to identify academic needs and evaluate progress, (3) highly focused professional development, (4) replicating best practice, (5) aligning primary resources with the instructional focus and (6) engagement of families and community in the education of students.

The plan identifies its overarching priorities as improvement in math and literacy performance. With various forms of professional development at its core, the plan's action steps rely on the major program adoptions in math and literacy to target specific facets of each subject identified as weaknesses through MCAS testing. Though the plan did not address specific strategies for improving the performance of bilingual and Special Education students, coverage of particular strand gaps in the math curriculum, or documentation of unresolved discipline questions, the WSIP does represent a logical platform for upgrading student performance.

A. Has the school analyzed appropriate data and program information to accurately identify the gaps in student performance and determined why those gaps exist?

Yes. The visiting panel noted ample evidence that the school utilized an array of procedures to identify the critical weaknesses in student achievement and the causes for the performance gaps. Multiple year reviews of MCAS data, examined at the school level with district consultation, provided summaries and an overview for the school's Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) to serve as the vehicle to engage staff in understanding and planning for WSIP implementation. The principal's statistical and narrative analysis of data in its school-wide and disaggregated form was thorough, and provided a good account of the performance divisions within the school. The teachers' written statements and perceptions of the overriding instructional challenges the school faced were less detailed and consistent. In the survey responses provided for the Panel Review, there was a mixed understanding of the expectations for teachers in helping to improve student achievement. During interviews, teachers defined their objectives more sharply as developing the math and literacy proficiencies of their students and were able to talk to the specific priorities in each subject. A similar disconnect existed between survey and interview explanations for poor student performance. The written survey pointed to many external influences (poverty, poor parent involvement, discipline, language barriers) to explain student underachievement. Site interviews revealed ownership of the problems, recognition that there are identified skill-based deficits and that there are instructional remedies over which the faculty and administrators do exercise control.

The paramount needs that emerged in the ELA and math MCAS exams centered on open response questions, with the most pronounced mathematics skill deficiency in multi-step problem solving and the literacy priority aimed at improving performance in writing and reading in different genres and contexts. The school administered a mock math MCAS test for students in grades six and eight in January, 2003. The Curley analysis of program and service information is further advanced by a Self Assessment Survey which contains a statement of accomplishments and challenges as they relate to the six essentials of the improvement effort. The SAS serves as both a status report and a bridge to future objectives. Student performance is also gauged by the district's formative assessment benchmark tests in all subject areas. Administered throughout the year, (SRI-reading, district mandated and designed Math Tasks and writing prompts in science and social studies) the tests supply a view of student performance across the curricula and become points of feedback for teachers, literacy and math coaches, school Directors of

Instruction and the principal. While these assessments serve as important checkpoints across the school year, they lack the rigor of MCAS-type material and may not produce directly correlated results.

The assessment practices at the Curley school are supported in the plan by a number of structural elements instituted this year to address mutual concerns raised by teachers and by the administrative staff. The school schedule was realigned to maximize Common Planning Time and the impact of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) coaching concept as the primary force for professional development. Looking at student work (LASW) is a cornerstone of district emphasis on training staff to become comfortable and adept at data driven instruction. The principal built a schedule promoting a shared and decentralized system of collaboration. Under the new schedule, content area teachers meet weekly to examine student classroom work, share teaching practice and analyze summative (MCAS) and formative data (SRI, Math Tasks and writing prompts) to guide and inform instruction. Grade level instructional team (Prides) meetings are not contractually mandated but these clusters do confer as needed to address team issues. The ILT sets an LASW schedule to review samples of student work to verify the effectiveness of the instructional priorities and to evaluate student growth and needs. The school's curriculum, established by BPS and aligned with state learning standards, was seen as effective and appropriate for Curley students as measured by the Department of Education Staff Survey and most teacher interviews.

Several common factors contributing to the school's performance gaps were identified in conversations between the principal and teachers in the spring of 2002. These included: (1) inadequate instructional time in ELA and math; (2) the need for additional coaching and professional development support in math to accelerate the shift from two previous math programs to CMP; (3) an absence of consistent, significant collaborative time for reflective discussions as a means of skill sharing, and (4) facilitating the training of an expanding number of new teachers. The ILT conducted a needs assessment that triggered critical decisions effectively doubling instructional time in mathematics and ELA to daily eighty minute blocks in each subject. The consequent staffing and professional development implications intensified the need to address teaming, coaching and supervision issues. This drove budget decisions to secure additional math coaching time and a second Director of Instruction rather than another assistant principal. Lead teachers in math were trained and the weekly content and monthly department meetings became more vital as professional development outlets.

B. Does the plan set out specific improvement objectives that are grounded in the school's analysis of the reasons for poor student performance?

Yes. Specific student improvement targets are articulated in the BPS system of SMART Goals in both summative and formative objectives. The MCAS goals are established by the BPS Office of Research and Development and prepare growth targets for moving an anticipated percentage of students out of the MCAS warning category and into the proficient and advanced classifications. The school-generated, formative SMART Goals describe the percentage of students who will pass subject-based benchmarks and a proposed remedial plan for those students who fail to meet the standard. Given the performance profile of the school, the Review Panel characterized the MCAS goals as unreasonable and unachievable and questioned the

ultimate validity of the benchmark results since many of the goals were already (or close to) being achieved by Curley students. Both the Principal and Superintendent acknowledged the mismatch between the skills tested by MCAS and the SRI, Math Tasks and writing prompts. The Superintendent informed the panel that a new design for the WSIP is being formulated to incorporate more MCAS-like diagnostic assessments with increased attention to consistent measures of student performance.

The panel determined that the WSIP did address the causes of low student performance and that the thorough work done by the school's ILT establishes a reporting structure that periodically monitors the progress of the plan's priorities and action. It also satisfies the district's cardinal approach to improving student achievement through a complex set of school based staff development practices. The school did not augment the district's reliance on the value-limited formative benchmarks by establishing skills/knowledge standards to be attained as a means further determining the quality and effectiveness of student work. While the benchmark activities are not aligned with MCAS, and are less demanding, many teachers describe employing these formative results to select appropriate, ancillary materials of instruction, to make classroom grouping decisions, and to suggest small, necessary shifts in teaching strategy.

The school's primary instructional models, CMP (Connected Mathematics Program) and Reader's and Writer's Workshops drive both the curriculum delivery and the conceptual /practice components that accompany those programs. The Curley School WSIP ties the BPS' Six Essentials of Whole School Improvement to its central literacy and math priorities and creates a series of action steps to operationalize the initiatives designed to address gaps revealed by the analysis of data. For example, the Effective Instructional Practice objective connects the literacy priority to teachers' understanding and implementation of the fundamental principles of Writer's/Reader's Workshop. Subsequent action steps are coordinated to the role of the literacy coach in creating a Reader's Workshop demonstration classroom, peer observation activities and supporting teachers in carrying out the core features of the Workshop model. Classroom observations affirm teacher interview statements that the "gradual release of responsibility" concept in the Workshop promotes opportunities for students to work in pairs, triads or on an independent basis. In both ELA and math class observations, the panel described many examples of self-directed students, working purposefully on task with clear, challenging objectives and guidelines set by the teacher.

The school is applying its resources and utilizing personnel to attack the continuing gaps in math achievement identified in last year's MCAS and Math Tasks administered during the current school year. The central problem areas associated with CMP last year were allied to pacing issues and reading comprehension barriers. Although pacing remains a highly demanding task because of the diverse abilities of students within a class, teachers indicated that the increased math coaching presence this year affords an increased level of support. The extended math block has also helped to stabilize the pacing process. Cooperative work between the math and literacy coaches is taking place to ensure that teachers in both disciplines adopt common strategies to strengthen comprehension and writing skills as they assist students to plan and respond to open-ended questions. Interviews with math teachers confirmed that literacy practices have become an integral component of their work. Panel members noted that students were successfully pushed

to orally respond to questions in extended, explanatory dialogue and did so using varied and appropriate math vocabulary.

C. In order to accomplish each improvement objective, does the plan specify strategies which appear likely to lead to improved student results?

Yes. The thrust of the improvement plan for the Curley School is to build the internal capacity of the full staff to become more proficient educators. The panel determined that the delineated strategies are focused, organized and appear likely to lead to improved student performance results. One of the school's prominent goals is to engage teachers in an inquiry process to examine their instructional practice as they support students' math and literacy performance. Classroom-based coaching is the BPS chief professional development practice to improve instruction and student learning. In school year 2003-2004, the district will begin implementation of its Collaborative Coaching and Learning (CCL) model in literacy. Anticipating a large influx of new teachers, the school chose to launch the model in literacy this year. The WSIP status report, principal's observation, and teacher responses to the panel commend this guided peer coaching/support initiative as creating exposure to shared best practice in an effective, systematic way. The literacy coach has coordinated three nine week cycles, demonstrations are being conducted for and by teachers (including SpEd and bilingual staff), debriefing sessions are promoting discussions of exemplary work as well as being tied to Reader's and Writer' Workshop and LASW activities.

The plan consolidates a number of strategies to bolster the efficacy of Connected Math delivery. In the past, teachers were having difficulty balancing the need to cover basic skills with the investigation units of the program. They were allocating insufficient time to CMP, exacerbating the pacing dilemma. Before class work (BCW) is now conducted during the first fifteen minutes of the eighty minute block and is devoted to basic skill development. Panel visits to math classrooms observed productive use of this time with the transition to CMP generally seamless. In two classes, the teachers were able to couple the computation material with the CMP investigation planned for the day. The use of transition funds permitted the principal to hire a second math coach one day a week to work exclusively with sixth grade math teachers. The other coach (twice a week) is working primarily with the eighth grade teachers who are implementing CMP for the first time this year. Math content meetings center on LASW, best practice dialogue, the results of district Math Tasks and individual or grade discussions about lessons coaches taught or observed. Continuing CMP professional development is offered to teachers by the district. In several interviews, math teachers noted the easy correspondence between Connected Math and the integration of literacy to the curriculum. They referred to the "math reflections" as a natural link to writing proficiency.

While efforts are taking place on many fronts to improve math performance, the principal acknowledges that there has been a slower than anticipated turnaround in test scores. Math teachers articulated a key concern about the existing gaps in CMP coverage of geometry, algebra, integers and probability in preparation for MCAS. This point is not mentioned in the WSIP and was only tangentially answered during leadership interviews. At present, there does not appear to be any coordinated plan to bring these strands into alignment with MCAS. The panel sensed that in the area of resource allocation, the administrative support for math trails the

level of service offered in literacy. There is a full-time literacy coach and a Director of Instruction who does teacher training and evaluation. In math, there is only the equivalent of a 60 percent coach with no Director assigned to that subject.

Although chronic problems in math persist, the panel cited three examples of math teachers observed conducting excellent lessons. These recitations were marked by critical thinking opportunities that were skillfully handled by students, conceptual math conversations drawing on use of reasoning and a natural expectation among many students that answers are to be fully explained. In other subject areas, panel members saw word walls related to the recitation, daily planning agendas on the board to define the day's work and teachers scaffolding lessons to lead students to an open ended response. Rubrics and exemplars of good work were evident along with examples of constructivist approaches in science, effective questioning skills and teachers diligently pressing students to work through problems. Based on the sample of classroom visitations done by the Panel, there was evidence of good pupil-teacher interaction, work that encouraged students to be thoughtful and expressive, and structured learning activities supported by varied instructional techniques.

D. Are the school's written improvement planning document (s) clear and specific enough to guide their implementation of planned improvement initiatives?

Yes. The school's improvement strategies are clear in that they are constructed around the district's fundamental improvement principles providing a framework to the WSIP and promote its capacity to guide the work of the staff. Action steps for each major initiative are specific and the goals are generally inherent in the action statement itself. All major objectives are explicitly linked to math and literacy priorities. Role expectations are clear and responsibilities as supervisors and evaluators are implied. The dominant thread of professional development drives this plan and it is the coaches, Directors, ILT and administrators who are identified as the contacts responsible for the plan's implementation and management.

The panel noted several limitations with the written planning documents. The action plan is largely characterized by descriptors of teams (ILT, coaches and administration) performing an oversight function for an initiative and provides no specificity about the predominant skill or knowledge weaknesses that are targeted by the use of the CMP or the Workshop instructional strategies. Much of this information was uncovered in interviews and observations. For example, in ELA, it was ascertained that students need a healthy dose of separately taught grammar, a phonics concentration and word recognition skills. This sort of understanding incorporated into the WSIP, would illustrate the most pressing student needs, articulate a more precise causal basis of poor achievement and offer a measurable basis for evaluating student performance. There are numerous initiatives that are evaluated in the ILT interim report of the plan's progress but they are assessed for compliance, not effectiveness. For instance, though teachers uniformly praise the eighty minute instructional block, there is no quantifiable procedure to document the positive effect of this change. This is a one-year plan that is monitored in writing three times a year by the ILT, distributed to staff as a working document and used as a reference point for progress by administrators and teachers at content, team, department and staff meetings. There are however, no timelines built into the plan that would reflect the accomplishment of specific initiatives within designated intervals.

The school climate priority in the plan relies on staff training in Cooperative Discipline and the 'team configuration' to build and sustain small learning communities, with the Pride coordinators assuming the crucial function in the referral process. The school is piloting a prevention program with Harvard University(RALLY) framed to meet the mental health needs of adolescents at risk and involves master's level practitioners working with four homerooms for the full year. The model will expand to eight classes and the plan suggests that the peer observation practices of CCL could build a culture of collaboration that would allow RALLY to flourish in other Prides (teams). The teacher narrative survey isolates discipline as a prominent barrier to learning, and interviews described the absence of a common, coordinated school-wide approach to discipline within the school. Even though Pride coordinators handle the team discipline function, it is the assistant principal who is charged with the overall management of the school's discipline program. The assistant principal is currently away on extended military leave and the panel heard of no substantive or immediate plan to replace him. Nevertheless, teachers talked about a more civil and harmonious spirit in the building and attribute much of this to the principal's high visibility, caring, fairness and his ability to connect with students at many levels. In corridors and classrooms, the panel saw pleasant, respectful interactions between staff and children. Four student focus groups informed the panel that they feel safe in the school, there is an increased sense of stability and organization and that teachers appear to be more responsible and supportive. While the panel believes that the current school environment seems to promote a stable learning atmosphere, the matter of the assistant principal and the position's function in building a viable discipline policy needs to be resolved. Many teachers indicated that the decentralized discipline approach (by Prides) creates differing levels of effectiveness and mini-policies that fail to produce a uniform application of the code of conduct throughout the school.

The district has not yet instituted Individual Student Success Plans for middle schools. Furthermore, there is no process to chronicle the attainment of substantive student learning standards in the plan beyond the somewhat inflated performance results produced by district's formative assessments. It was through individual teacher and focus group interviews where the panel learned how teachers are using CMP and Workshop assessment components, tests, quizzes, portfolios, homework and unit projects to gauge student growth and inform curriculum modification or instructional practice. These efforts were not codified into the WSIP to enrich the current benchmark system.

There is a prevailing staff sense that the school has a well-defined plan for reaching student performance goals. This was stated in the Department of Education Staff Survey (73 percent agreed or strongly agreed) and in the majority of teacher interviews. Site interviews clarified the vagueness in the teacher survey about expectations associated with the charge to improve student performance. The panel heard evidence of favorable teacher reaction to the work of the ILT in communicating explicit aspects of the WSIP in all its stages of development and implementation. The ILT is progressively training staff in the use of *MyBPS*, a student achievement data management system for teachers. Teachers who have accessed the web-site told the panel that it furnishes them with yet another useful data analysis tool. In curriculum content meetings teachers are often asked to complete response sheets representing reflective group discussion about an aspect of data under review. One such meeting encouraged teachers to describe what

the data told them about the school, their students and teaching, with particular emphasis on strategies to develop critical thinking skills, oral and written expressive abilities. With almost one-third of the staff new to the building or to the career this year, teachers and leadership credited collaborative meetings about student work and CCL sessions as factors that foster increased instructional competence and expedited adjustment to the school.

E. Was the School Improvement Plan developed through a process that will support its successful implementation?

Yes. The organizational infrastructure created by the principal appears to keep communication channels open at many levels, facilitating achievement of the action steps. Last year, the ILT engaged the entire staff in a needs assessment, and synthesized those findings into the current plan. Each PRIDE (grade team-cluster) has a full-time coordinator who arranges optional meetings two or three times a week to address policies, protocols, referrals, attendance, planned team events, awards ceremonies or parent conferences. Although this has the potential of becoming an effective professional development medium, teachers and the principal indicated that some PRIDEs meet more frequently and productively than others. The coordinator manages the administrative business of the PRIDE but also engages teachers in discussions about the effect of teaching practice on student needs. There is a PRIDE for both the bilingual and the TBE units. To ensure a gradual transition to middle school, two-teacher PRIDEs were formed in the sixth grade, easing the students into a departmental arrangement and allowing for heightened instructional flexibility. This compares with six-teacher clusters in grades seven and eight. Teachers interviewed reported that the PRIDE structure has brought students closer to the staff, minimized hall movement and has resulted in a calmer behavioral tone in the building.

One Director of Instruction supervises and evaluates ELA teachers and the second Director covers science and social studies. The panel heard no evidence that there was a duplication of work or role confusion between duties of the coaches, Pride coordinators, Directors and the ILT. The strong leadership of the principal and understandable administrative delineations in the WSIP was conveyed to the panel in documents and staff interviews. The impact of the Collaborative Coaching and Learning (CCL) model is assessed regularly by coaches and administrators through content meetings and non-evaluative, informal classroom visits. The ILT, composed of administrators, teachers and a parent, is the body charged with building, communicating and overseeing the plan's implementation and reviewing its progress. This year the ILT conducted a survey of school climate, refined referral forms and will provide training in the revised aspects of the referral procedures. As part of its responsibility to assess the plan's implementation, the ILT has conducted walk-throughs of classrooms, PRIDE and content meetings. Protocols are being developed to make this a more workable process. The ILT informs staff of its work through summaries and minutes after every bi-monthly meeting and they use content meetings as a channel to maintain an accurate pulse on the status of teachers' instructional priorities. As part of its goal to elevate teacher-leadership roles in the school, the plan calls for key roles on the committee to be rotated and for the ILT to devise strategies and incentives to build greater leadership capacity among the instructional staff.

KEY QUESTION 2: ARE THE CONDITIONS IN PLACE FOR THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE IMPROVEMENT PLAN(S)?

Yes. The energy and vision of the principal's personal leadership, an administrative-instructional framework created to advance student learning priorities, and substantial district support and guidance position the Curley Middle School to successfully implement the improvement objectives in the Whole School Improvement Plan. A variety of evidence sources indicate that the Principal has established himself as an inclusive leader who is knowledgeable in instructional methodology. In addition he is a strong advocate for children and an administrator able to leverage and utilize resources effectively.

A. Does the school have effective leadership and sound management?

Yes. Interviews with the Superintendent and teachers suggest a turnaround in school climate and learning culture. In September 2001, the Superintendent replaced a popular principal with the current school leader to establish a more conducive learning environment, set common expectations and begin the systemic analysis of data to improve student achievement. In a focus group discussion of causal factors for poor student achievement, the school's full leadership team alluded to the "transitional" feeling that previously pervaded the school because of frequent leadership changes (three principals in five years) and high teacher turnover. They referred to earlier school schedules, and growing mental health and social services needs of students, as disincentives to collegial support. Furthermore, these conditions shortchanged students who required extensive contact time in the critical subjects of literacy and math. The group informed the panel that many problem areas have been successfully tackled in the present plan, including the principal's commitment to small learning communities and the power of regular professional collaboration and conversation about student learning. The panel heard, "He (principal) wants to be with us." and that the patient attention to the plan's action steps hold the promise of institutionalizing many of the positive changes that have been introduced this year. School leaders also articulated a cautionary perception that areas of progress could slip under the weight of multiple, simultaneous improvement initiatives.

Many of the principal's activities as instructional leader are geared to the identified weaknesses in student achievement and staff development needs. He recently invited the district's Program Director for Middle School Math to conduct an informal walk through of all math classrooms and informed the staff of the strengths and challenges evident during the visit. The principal and the two Directors of Instruction employ the evaluation concepts of Research for Better Teaching with its analytical approach to instructional practice and emphasis on high-quality feedback. Although not all teachers have had RBT training, its benefits as a learning/evaluation tool add another dimension to the mosaic of professional development activities. Teachers referenced the principal's regular, informal visits to their classrooms, followed by a brief note providing some type of feedback. Examples were cited of the principal regularly participating in lessons with the students. Teacher focus groups characterized the principal as intelligent, resourceful, passionate, multi-faceted and working to instill pride in quality work.

The principal took a number of administrative steps to upgrade the nature of service to special needs and bilingual students. Resource room teacher roles were streamlined to have them teach either math or ELA, not the wider menu of subjects they formerly taught. Greater mainstreaming was effected for bilingual students. The longer instructional blocks for literacy and math were

also scheduled for special needs and bilingual students. Math coaches delivered training and in-class support to special needs staff and the SpEd unit was physically integrated to the school PRIDEs, reducing the sense of isolation. All teachers who serve special needs students receive a copy of the modifications outlined in the IEPs. Special needs and ESL teachers were assigned to a content area for weekly coaching and other professional development sessions.

However, in conversations with the principal and an examination of testing documents, the panel observed that the WSIP itself did not specifically stipulate substantive improvement efforts for either special needs or bilingual students. Curley is the Transitional Bilingual Education center for its cluster and is not an inclusion school. Achievement results of the special needs and bilingual populations have lagged dramatically behind regular education ELA and math scores in both MCAS and formative benchmarks at the school. MCAS scores for both groups are also below the performance level of district students. The School Assessment Survey recognized that the math pacing schedule was unresponsive to diverse student learning needs and rates. Apart from the administrative actions outlined here, the principal is treating the improvement focus for these groups through the same lens as the regular population- equality in curriculum, instructional time and coaching support. The role of the school's special needs coordinator was not fully obvious to the panel.

The February WSIP status report, principal and teacher interviews highlight the difficulty the school continues to experience engaging families and the community as partners to support student learning. From the survey responses provide to the Panel Review team, the general staff perception is that strategies are in place to provide families the resources, information and opportunities to learn about their children's academic progress and become more involved in the life of the school. An interview with the parent focus group confirmed the school's efforts to narrow the divide between school and family. Newsletters are sent home on a regular schedule announcing events and initiatives to parents; sections of the newsletter are published in Spanish. Student agenda books go home each day to familiarize parents with the nature of pupil work and provide parents the option to communicate with teachers. The parent liaison has organized monthly workshops about literacy, math, MCAS, child development topics and continues to cultivate community and business partners in support of the school's instructional objectives. In an attempt to make teacher/parent meetings more valuable, the WSIP has set a goal of having the ILT reschedule conferences to be held at more appropriate times for Curley families. The plan calls for professional development in the use of conference time and keeping the agenda focused on identifying individual student performance goals. Leadership and staff concede disappointing outreach results in attempts to involve parents in the education of their children but see this as a work in progress.

B. Is there evidence that the school's faculty supports the planned improvement efforts?

Yes. Although coverage and pacing issues in specific units of CMP are still to be resolved, interviews with teachers and administrators disclosed a sense of confidence that the literacy and math programs and initiatives would ultimately improve student achievement since they included goals, activities, approaches, materials and assessments that promote a structured approach to learning. Panelists heard a convincing "yes" when asking teacher focus groups if they believed that Curley students could learn well. After a late, slow start, corresponding to tensions during

the adjustment period under new leadership, teachers were increasingly brought into the needs assessment and planning process through direct dialogue with the principal, content and department meetings, coaching forums and through the many functions of the ILT. Although the panel received a mixed message in the written narrative survey that preceded the visit, interviews revealed a staff that accepted the full professional burden for closing student performance gaps, without blame placing or dwelling on external causes. The panel saw a faculty surrounded by a collegial learning culture, organized opportunities to examine and interpret data and student work and an increasing consultative role in the educational decisions of students.

English/language arts teachers referred to the strengths of Reader's/Writers Workshops as programs well suited to the learning demands of differing skill levels, with particular benefit to bilingual students. Language arts teachers praised the consistency of the mini-lesson, inquiry, summary format and stated that the long teaching block allows for conferencing and individual student assessment time. Panelists observed a twenty minute sustained silent reading period-a fixed part of the ELA block, launched to cultivate a predictable, daily reading experience for students. Though the Cycle II performance ratings in ELA were still in the very low range, the school did meet its AYP improvement rating.

Math teachers presented honest judgments about the current limitations of CMP and the positive properties of the program. It reinforces literacy initiatives but plagues struggling readers. Teachers are attempting to work through those MCAS mandates that are insufficiently covered in the program. The ordered nature of the program provides clear timelines, but for some, sacrifices quality to pacing. What is significant at Curley is that peer observation, coaching and regular professional development for novices and experienced staff are channels to solutions. The BPS Deputy Superintendent told the principal to encourage flexibility in resolving CMP obstacles. Newly selected math teacher leaders are working with the city math department observing exemplary practice in other buildings and serving as mentors at Curley. The school has successfully obtained funding to encourage the stronger math teachers to take coursework at Harvard and Northeastern and offers stipends for them to register. The after-school homework and MCAS prep sessions show consistently strong attendance. Math teachers are increasingly making use of math MCAS questions because of the close parallel to CMP.

C. Is the school receiving adequate guidance and support from the district leadership?

Yes. The school district provides considerable and diversified forms of guidance and assistance to the Curley Middle School. As a source of professional development for the principal there is a support group for new administrators at the Center for Leadership Development. A BPS Instructional Leader serves the school/principal in an advisory role as a consultant on the WSIP and data analysis. One of the deputy superintendents supports the principal's function as the school's instructional leader, participates in some aspects of professional development and reviews the school's annual plan. District department heads visit the school frequently to work with teachers on curriculum and instructional matters- often modeling or observing lessons. This year they have increased the math coaching time and the literacy coach oversees the implementation of the new CCL model and is the mainstay of Reader's and Writer's Workshop.

District-wide training is available on a continuous basis for CMP. The school’s participation in piloting CCL this year brought with it extra funding for Workshop activities and classroom libraries. BPS allocations underwrite a wide range of after-school academic programs, and external resources (Carnegie, Annenberg) are partial resources for school coaching assistance. The district develops Math Tasks administered throughout the year and has produced a rubric for their evaluation. In a previous reference to district support available for math, the panel observed an inequity in coaching service for literacy and mathematics. Since math performance is still in the critically low range, the panel felt that the school’s math needs were underserved by the current level of coaching support.

CONCLUSION

In affirming the soundness of the Mary E. Curley Middle School WSIP and the existing conditions to successfully implement the plan, the Review Panel considered its fidelity to the core instructional objectives, the thoughtfulness and scope of the action steps, leadership, organizational effectiveness, application of resources and monitoring procedures. Though student math achievement endures as a major challenge and continuity of staff remains a key hurdle, the district and school are committed to literacy and math programs endorsed by most staff. Teacher confidence in the leadership skills of the principal and the strong underpinnings of district support for school initiatives, appear to place the Curley school on track for improved student performance.

**APPENDIX A
Team Members**

- Scott Kelley**, Ph.D., Panel Coordinator, MA Department of Education Accountability Unit
- Nick Feldman**, Panel Chairperson, Consultant for SchoolWorks
- Brian Abdallah**, Principal, New Bedford Public Schools
- Mary Kate Fenton**, Professional Development Coordinator, Springfield Public Schools
- Joanne Grenier**, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Marlborough Public Schools

APPENDIX B
UNDER-PERFORMING PANEL REVIEW SCHEDULE
Detailed Schedule for Review Panel School Site Visit

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

Day 1

- 10:30—12:00* Panel chairperson and panel coordinator meet to discuss and clarify roles, prepare for the first team meeting, and review general logistics/schedule for the review. [location: hotel]
- 12:00—2:00 p.m.* **Team meeting # 1:** team meets for the first time to discuss each panelist's individual analysis; team forms preliminary judgements on key questions. [location: hotel]
- 2:00—3:00 p.m.* Panelists meet with the district Superintendent (and Assistant Superintendent, if appropriate). [location: hotel]
- 3:30—4:30 p.m.* Panelists meet with Principal (and one other school-based individual, if appropriate). [location: the school]
- 6:00—8:00 p.m.* **Team meeting # 2:** panelists synthesize interview information, further define findings, prepare questions, and develop a team strategy for Day 2 of the review. [location: hotel]

Day 2

All activities take place in the school

- 7:30—8:00 a.m.* Panelists meet with the Principal
- 8:00—8:30 a.m.* Panelists meet with the School Council
- 8:30—9:00 a.m.* Panelists meet with Focus Groups. The Panel Review Coordinator and the Principal will identify participants for each Focus Group. The groups will be organized, as appropriate, to include groups of individuals who can respond to questions designed for parents, students, classroom teachers, curriculum facilitators, content-area specialists, grade-level instructors, or other specific inquiry groups.

Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D	Panelist E
Focus Group	Focus Group	Focus Group	Focus Group	Focus Group

- 9:00—11:00 a.m.* Classroom observations and teacher interviews

	Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D	Panelist E
9-10 a.m.	Observe teacher 1 and teacher 2	Observe teacher 3 and teacher 4	Observe teacher 5 and teacher 6	Observe teacher 7 and teacher 8	Observe teacher 9 and teacher 10
10-11 a.m.	Interview teacher 1 and teacher 2 individually	Interview teacher 3 and teacher 4 individually	Interview teacher 5 and teacher 6 individually	Interview teacher 7 and teacher 8 individually	Interview teacher 9 and teacher 10 individually

11 a.m.—12:30 p.m. **Team meeting # 3:** panelists meet to discuss findings so far and to plan the remainder of the day (working lunch)

12:30—1:00 p.m. Panelists use time as needed to analyze findings and to gather more information; panelists are encouraged to roam the entire school and visit classrooms not yet seen.

1:00—2:00 p.m. Panelists meet with teachers in groups; consultant co-chair is free to work on report

	Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D	Panelist E
1:00-1:30	Teacher	Focus Group 1	Teacher	Focus Group 3	Prepare report
1:30-2:00	Teacher	Focus Group 2	Teacher	Focus Group 4	

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. **Team meeting # 4:** panelists deliberate and form conclusions