

## **School Panel Review Report Liberty Elementary School Springfield 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. Liberty Elementary School met this criterion at the third and fourth grade and was one of 14 schools selected for panel review in spring, 2003. The Panel review was conducted on February 11–12, 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 Liberty Elementary 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.

### **Liberty Elementary School Profile**

The Liberty Elementary School is one of 49 schools in Springfield, and 33 elementary schools in the district. Enrollment at Liberty for the last four years has fluctuated between the high 200s and low 300s. Asian students for the last four years accounted for an average of one percent of the school's total population while Blacks and Whites have accounted for 25 percent each, with the majority being students of Hispanic descent. On average, eighty percent of students at Liberty during this time period were low-income. The school is also designated as a School-Wide Title I school. Perhaps most important in the school's composition is that in 2000, it reported 50 percent of its students as non-native English speakers in 2000 while in 1999 there were no non-

native English speakers, and in 2001 and 2002 they accounted for less than five percent of the school's total student population.

Attendance at the Liberty for the 1998 through 2001 averaged 92 percent. The school also has a very low record of retention, which for the aforementioned four years has averaged a rate less than 2 percent. For those four years there were no recorded in-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspension remained at a rate of less than 1 percent. Exclusions have improved from a rate of 9.3 to none, although an increase of 3.2 was recorded for 2002.

In 2003, the Liberty Elementary School reported that 28 students were receiving Special Education, and 271 students were receiving supplementary education services through Title I fund.

### **Staffing**

Liberty Elementary School has a staff of 27 that includes 20 teachers, three teacher aides, one guidance counselor, one librarian, one nurse, and one reported administrator. With the exception of the teacher aides and one foreign language instructor, all teachers are certified in the subjects in which they teach. Seventy percent of teachers have been at this school for five years or fewer.

### **MCAS Overview**

As an elementary school, Liberty students take the MCAS English language arts (ELA) in grades 3 and 4. Students are also tested in mathematics in grade 4. While MCAS participation rate at Liberty for the last four years has been at or near 100 percent, the school has repeatedly failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress since 1999 in both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics.

#### *Student Performance in English Language Arts*

Liberty Elementary School's performance in Cycle II (2201-2002) was rated "Very Low" in ELA, with improvement rated "Declined." Student performance in English language arts at Liberty has been on a downward spiral since 1999. The school's Cycle II proficiency index of 51.3 indicates a negative change of 8.1 points compared to its Baseline (1999-2002) performance.

The performance of Regular Education students in ELA at this school has worsened over the last four years. In 1999, three percent of students performed at the Advanced level, and 45 percent were proficient. Forty-three percent were determined to be in need of improvement, and 10 percent performed at the Warning level. In 2000, three percent of the school's grade 4 population was Advanced, but the percentage of proficient students declined by more than half to 20 percent, with increasing an percentage (50 percent) in the Needs Improvement. Almost, three times as many students (28 percent) performed in the Warning category. In 2001, two percent of students were advanced, 16 percent proficient, with 54 percent at the Needs Improvement level, and 28 percent in Warning. In 2002, there were no advanced students, and only 8 percent—half

the previous year's proportion—were proficient. Sixty-two percent of scores fell in the Needs Improvement category, and the remaining 30 percent in Warning.

Fewer than 10 Special Education and Limited English Proficient students were tested at this school.

### *Student Performance in Mathematics*

In mathematics, Liberty Elementary School's performance was found to be "Critically Low," while improvement was rated "Declined." Student performance regression has been more dramatic in mathematics where the school registered a change of -14.4 in its Cycle II proficiency index of 38.8 compared to its Baseline index of 53.2.

Over the last four years, there has been an increasing proportion of Regular Education students scoring at the Warning level at this school. In 1999, 13 percent of grade 4 students at the Liberty Elementary School scored at the Advanced level of performance, 15 percent were proficient, 50 percent performed at the Needs Improvement level, and 23 percent in Warning. In 2000, the proportion of advanced students fell to just three percent, and 13 percent were found proficient, while equal percentages of scores (43) were at the Needs Improvement and Warning levels. In the first year of Cycle II, there were no advanced students, and only two percent of students were proficient. Forty six percent of scores fell in the Needs Improvement category and 52 percent in Warning. In the second year of the cycle, the percentage of proficient students rose to six percent, while those in Needs Improvement fell to 28 and those in Warning rose to 66 percent.

## **PANEL RESPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS**

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

Discussion with school personnel and district leaders and review of the Liberty School Improvement Plan indicate to the Panel Review team that the plan is not a sound tool for guiding school improvement efforts. The plan originally constructed for the 2002-2003 school year was not based on an analysis of student performance results leading to the identification of specific gaps in student learning. Strategies for improvement are general and broad and are not linked to the reasons for the gaps in student proficiency. The district recently started working with selected schools to develop skill in using student performance results to guide improvement planning, but it is too soon to predict whether this process will achieve its desired results.

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

No. Liberty Elementary School is just beginning to take a detailed look at student performance data, and the staff has not yet reached a level of proficiency in analyzing the information to accurately identify gaps in student learning. The school has adopted several instructional changes, but there is no indication that the changes are based on a detailed understanding of

student weaknesses. An in-depth review of school programs and practices has not been conducted to help identify the reasons why student performance fails to meet acceptable standards.

As part of an intervention for schools in need of improvement, the Springfield School District Central Office administrators conducted a workshop in January, 2003 attended by a team of five representatives from Liberty Elementary School. At the workshop, district staff provided packets of assessment summaries for Liberty students. The Liberty team was instructed to review the information and identify specific areas of student need in English Language Arts (ELA). In its first attempt at this process, the Liberty team decided that language conventions and vocabulary were major weaknesses among the fourth grade students based on the 2002 MCAS results. This finding became a starting point for a newly revised Liberty School Improvement Plan that is in its early draft stages.

Prior to the district's intervention workshop, Liberty's original *2002-2003 School Improvement Plan* included no reference to an analysis of student performance results, no review of instructional practices and no study of the effectiveness of the school's existing initiatives. The Principal indicated she has had just recently received information on the effectiveness of data analysis, but limited experience and confidence in analyzing data and little or no feedback from district supervisors on the contents or quality of the Improvement Plans she submits.

In addition to the analysis of MCAS results conducted under the guidance of central office personnel, the introduction of the Success For All (SFA) reading program and its embedded periodic assessments has contributed to the start of a data collection and analysis process directly linked to the school's reading program. As of the time of the Panel Review, the school had gathered baseline assessment of all grades, but had only completed its first 8 week assessment for grades 1 and 2. If collected accurately and regularly, the SFA results may provide the school with helpful diagnosis of the progress of its students.

Despite insufficient analysis of performance data to identify specific learning gaps, the school has implemented several changes in its academic program that it hopes will lead to improved student results. To address the general deficiencies in reading recognized by the school from its overall MCAS results, Liberty applied for and received a Comprehensive School Reform Design grant for 2002 - 2005 and elected to adopt the *Success for All* reading program. The needs assessment conducted for the grant application does not cite specific student performance weaknesses, but rather refers to the school's high poverty ethnic minority population as its key reason for selecting SFA. There has not been a detailed review of the strengths or weaknesses of the previous reading program or an indication of why the school believes SFA will lead to improved student results other than parallels between Liberty's student demographics and that of other students for whom SFA has demonstrated success.

The staff at Liberty adjusted its class schedule recently to implement a 90 minute block for mathematics instruction with the expectation that a longer block would improve student performance. Previously, students rotated through 40 minute class periods for mathematics, science and social studies. The adjustment of the daily schedule to lengthen mathematics instructional time was not based on a review of student results or a study of the existing use of

class time or instructional pacing. Lengthening the math block may or may not improve student learning, but it is clear the decision is not based on reliable evidence of weaknesses in content or skills, but rather on a presumption that longer time blocks will show results.

In addition to the gaps in academic skills and knowledge among Liberty students, teachers, parents and administrators noted two other important factors contributing to poor student results – absenteeism and discipline. Data for the 2001-2002 academic year indicate average student absences at 16.6 days per year. Teachers cited three, six and even ten students absent from a primary grade class on different days over the past two weeks. A new district attendance policy has been endorsed by the School Committee but its impact has not yet been evident. Some teachers reported a perception that attendance has improved, but the more prevalent sense was that student performance was significantly impaired due to excessive absenteeism.

Teachers noted in the survey and interviews completed for the Panel Review that lack of a consistent approach to discipline with a detailed sequence of steps for addressing serious discipline infractions distracted both faculty and students from the academic work of the school. More than two thirds of the teachers interviewed repeated their concern that student behavior endangered other students as well as staff, and takes away from valuable time for classroom instruction. The team learned that there has been a notable increase recently in student assaults on teachers by even the youngest students. Neither discipline nor attendance is mentioned as areas of need for the school to address systematically as part of either draft of its improvement plan.

From a review of the school's documents and discussions with school personnel, the Panel Review team determined that Liberty Elementary School has attempted to identify the causes for poor performance in English Language Arts and Mathematics but has not identified root causes or linked the causes it identified to actual reasons for poor performance. The school has not yet probed deeply the causes for poor student attendance and disruptive student behavior. Without significant effort to identify the reasons for each of the elements that contribute to poor student achievement, solutions selected by the school to attempt to improve are unlikely to target precisely the factors that need to be addressed.

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

No. The original *2002-2003 Liberty School Improvement Plan* lists broad goals for instruction, assessment, student learning, and leadership, but, as noted in the previous section, the initial 02-03 SIP does not link the history of Liberty student performance results to its selection of specific learning objectives.

In the area of curriculum for ELA and math, the Liberty plan declares, "Goal is development of conceptual understanding and applied skills." Under the heading, 'Instruction,' the plan lists teacher collaboration and use of a variety of strategies as two approaches. The plan also notes, "Concepts, knowledge and skills are learned by all students," a broad declaration that does not

specify the particular content and skills students at Liberty have yet to master nor which instructional strategies are best suited to facilitating this content mastery.

A large portion of the original *02-03 School Improvement Plan* describes the implementation of the *Success For All* reading program. Most of the content in the plan about SFA paraphrases the standard marketing materials and program description provided by the publisher. The 02-03 SIP document does not describe how the aspects of SFA like one on one tutoring, or family support and integrated services, are to be implemented and integrated into the existing Liberty curriculum.

As a product of the initial meetings of the district intervention process, the Liberty representatives produced a portion of an improvement plan draft that is expected to be more specific to Liberty's students. However, the initial analysis conducted by the Liberty team continues to address learning gaps very broadly. For example, in *Appendix 2, Prioritized Areas of Weakness*, in answer to the question, Which areas of student performance are most in need of attention?, the school has identified "language conventions," and "low needs improvement – high failing – 75 percent; increased from 2001-2002." In the Panel Review team's judgment, the revised SIP being developed shows no greater accuracy in identifying student needs or defining strategies to meet the needs specific to Liberty students.

As further confirmation of the plan's vague, unclear, unmeasurable objectives, the initial 02-03 Liberty SIP includes at least thirteen initiatives to be implemented for the current school year, only a few of which have been adopted and executed to any degree. For example, teachers interviewed during the visit expressed disappointment that the strategy of Looking at Student Work has not been followed by the staff, although the plans declares that teachers "routinely use that (the LASW) protocol to improve instruction".

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

No. Because the plan does not offer specific objectives to match Liberty's needs, the school's current and recent modifications to its academic program do not lend confidence in their likelihood of success.

Research reported by the Superintendent and principal indicate that SFA, if properly implemented, is likely to raise student reading skills, particularly for the population at Liberty. However, the school's implementation is not being monitored systematically or guided by designated personnel to assure its effective use. SFA has embedded in it a system of student performance assessment that can be useful in focusing efforts on areas of student need, but without efficient and effective facilitation, it is unclear whether the assessment system will be a useful tool for Liberty teachers. Grade 1 teachers are making use of the regrouping strategies that are central to SFA, but teachers in other grades are unable to regroup because the school did not institute a fixed literacy block across all levels.

Some of the strategies implemented by the school as a way to improve student achievement are designed to address mathematics. The January, 2003 modification of the daily schedule to provide a 90 minute mathematics block in all grades was discussed in the previous section of this report. While extending learning time has the potential for improving achievement, without specific adjustments in instructional methods the longer block of time cannot be expected to effect much change in learning. Also, the school continues its extended day MCAS preparation class (begun during 2001-2002) despite a dramatic decline in 2002 MCAS results. The 2002 results suggest the MCAS preparation program was not effective, but the school plans to continue it as before without purposeful review of the program's quality. The Panel Review team is unable to judge whether the extended day program is likely to have a positive influence on student learning because the program has not been assessed.

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

No. A review of student performance results indicates that there are significant student weaknesses in English language arts but even greater gaps in mathematics. The original 02-03 Liberty SIP includes only broad goals and vague objectives for adoption of the SFA reading program, and omits any specific targets for mathematics. While designation of the SFA program is a specific strategy with clear guidelines, Liberty had not made sufficient allocation of resources to implement SFA effectively.

A key weakness in Liberty's implementation of SFA is the absence of a full time facilitator. The program requires extensive support for teachers as they learn to implement the program and efficiently manage the assessment components. The SFA Coordinator designated at Liberty has been out of school for most of the year on emergency leave, and neither the school nor the district has replaced this critical provider. At present, the "Roots" teachers have divided responsibility for grading and recording assessment results among themselves and the Principal has taken on the responsibility for facilitating the "Wings" component of SFA. The Principal admitted that she has struggled to complete the 'Wings' assessments which are not yet recorded for the first 8 week block.

Panel Review team members asked teachers how their work is monitored and coordinated, and the common response was that there is no oversight of instruction. Some teacher teams find time to work together and provide support to one another, but beyond informal common planning, there is no school-wide systematic process in place at Liberty to assure that the district curriculum is being taught. Likewise, teachers reported receiving little feedback on the quality of their instruction. According to one teacher, SFA consultants visit the school and have provided general school-wide feedback on Liberty's quality of implementation of the reading program. A few teachers have requested and received direct service and support from district curriculum specialists, but overall the faculty indicated little helpful guidance on their work. More than half the Liberty faculty are first or second year teachers, making the absence of instructional oversight a critical factor in the school's performance. Without meaningful guidance from curriculum specialists and administrators, strategies listed in the school's improvement plans are unlikely to be implemented effectively.

The text of the initial SIP offers weak definitions of needed changes. Examples from the original *02-03 Liberty School Improvement Plan* are quoted in answer to sub-question B of this section of the report. The other objectives in the document are similarly vague and unclear: “Student work is facilitated by all staff on ELA and math”; “Instructional methods based on content and performance standards in ELA and math”; “Multiple sources of evidence about student learning is visible in all classrooms.” In the judgment of the Panel Review team, the plan offers no meaningful guidance for implementing strategies that will address specific student needs.

Under recent district supervision, the *revised Liberty School Improvement Plan* begun last month lists student learning objectives that are slightly more precise (“Hispanic students will know/ be able to use/identify correct language conventions when reading or writing in the English language.”) but remain too broad and vague to provide sufficient guidance to lead to improved student results and further, fail to identify instructional strategies as to HOW such objectives will yield improved student results. For example, the learning objective in the previous sentence could be a component of a plan for any school serving students whose first language is not English.

Both the original 02-03 Liberty SIP and the revised version under construction are weak in defining the expectations for teachers, administrators and district personnel in support of the school’s efforts. Neither plan lists timelines and benchmarks for measuring the school’s progress toward its larger goals. Teachers replied with vague statements when asked about their responsibility for implementing the improvement strategies, with a common response “to implement SFA and the curriculum to the best of my ability.” Survey responses were corroborated by interview comments.

Both versions of the *Liberty School Improvement Plan* have significant deficiencies that make them ineffective tools for guiding change that is likely to lead to improved student achievement.

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

No. In the Principal’s *Leadership Report*, she explains that she is the primary author of the original SIP, despite efforts to solicit feedback and input from various stakeholder groups. Neither teachers nor parents expressed familiarity with the content and the purpose of the plan, and few expressed clear understanding of their role in meeting the plan’s targets.

As described by the Principal in the *Leadership Report*, the development of the initial *02-03 School Improvement Plan* began with an invitation to faculty to review the 01-02 plan and offer comments. The Principal submitted a draft of the 02-03 plan to the SCDM (School Centered Decision-Making Team) for completion and approval of the final document. Despite a process intended to solicit full participation, the Principal explained, “The reality has been that few people have taken advantage of opportunity and have relied more on the Principal to develop the plan.” (*Leadership Report*) Some teachers reported receiving copies of the Liberty 02-03 SIP just before the Panel Review visit.

Participants in the parent focus group expressed a lack of familiarity with the MCAS in general, and were unaware of the school's poor performance results. They stated support for the school, but in broad and general terms. They could not cite the specific strategies, with the exception of the after school program, the school had selected to raise student achievement, and they were unaware of any specific expectations for their contribution to the children's success.

According to the Principal and district supervisors, the revised process begun in January by district administrators required the school to recruit a representative group of faculty to serve as the Liberty Team. Two members of the team who were interviewed during the Panel Review indicated that they have met twice at district sponsored workshops, but have not yet shared their work with the full Liberty faculty or had time to meet as a team to discuss their individual impressions of the planning process.

The process through which the Liberty SIP was produced does not reflect a broad commitment by faculty or parents to the goals, objectives and strategies included in the document.

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

Liberty Elementary School is challenged by a number of management problems that prevent the staff from focusing their energy on implementing consistent strategies to improve student performance. Staff members retain mixed commitments to improvement strategies. The District offers general support to the school and its leadership, but has not targeted its support to meet the specific needs of the Liberty staff and students. In fact, some district initiatives conflict with instructional programs selected by the school. It is too soon to predict whether new efforts by the district to guide improvement planning will be effective.

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

No. Evidence from the visit suggests that the school leadership at Liberty elementary is not effective at executing a number of critical tasks in leading the school toward improvement. The school community is struggling with a lack of common vision. Contributing to this struggle are ineffective internal and external communication, inadequate engagement of all stakeholder in the school's purposes, a climate of unrest and disorder, and a perception of insufficient support for teachers' efforts.

In the school's documents and in interviews with parents, teachers, and the Principal, the Panel Review team found few common statements of the school's purpose or vision. Teachers and the Principal referred to the implementation of the SFA program as their primary goal, with a focus exclusively on the actions teachers must perform to put the program into place. There were no comments noting a focus on the impact of teachers' and administrator's actions on student achievement. Teachers expressed confusion about their role in the discipline practices at the school, explaining that there is no common code of behavior in the building. The two parents

present for the focus group expressed similar confusion about the school's primary goals and their role in improving student attendance. This lack of focus on a vision for Liberty Elementary permeates the school's climate.

As described by many teachers, internal communication at Liberty consists of paper memos, notices and copies of documents and reports circulated by the Principal. The school decision making team (SCDM) has met infrequently this school year due to lack of available common time for parents, the Principal and teacher representatives. As a result, teachers have no vehicle through which they can voice their concerns, nor do they have a means of gathering for discussion of important issues. Several teachers noted that too often the notices and memos they receive refer to meetings or events with deadlines that have passed. In almost all cases, teachers found the communication between principal and staff to be ineffective. The Superintendent reported hearing similar comments when he visited with the Liberty faculty early in the school year.

External communication between the school and its families relies primarily on students taking notices home, a system known to be less than fully productive. From the lack of awareness of major school issues among the parents participating in the focus group, it appears that the Principal has been unable to develop a meaningful process for sharing school-wide information with families.

One byproduct of the ineffective internal and external communication between the Principal, parents and staff is the school leader's inability to engage stakeholders in the school's efforts to improve. As noted earlier, faculty feedback on the SIP was limited, and parents were unaware of the plans' purposes or its existence.

Based on teacher surveys, interviews and observations during the visit, the climate at Liberty is best described as disorderly. Several teachers indicated they did not know the purpose of the Panel Review and were worried about the class visits panelists were to make. Group and individual interviews were difficult to conduct because of the last minute attempts to find coverage for classes. Teachers frequently mentioned the absence of a coherent procedure for dealing with disruptive behavior by students. The team learned that there have been more frequent instances of student assaults on teachers this year, and that few strategies and supports are available to teachers to deal with potentially dangerous situations. Teachers indicated that the numerous memos and notices they receive on paper contribute to the sense of disorder because these documents are not prioritized or sorted to indicate critical topics.

A final concern about the Liberty school leadership is the perception among a number of faculty members that their work is not supported. Lack of instructional oversight, the absence of an SFA facilitator to manage the complex tasks associated with maintaining that program, and the Principal's absence at critical parent meetings contribute to the staff feeling of isolation and lack of support from their leader. A number of teachers noted that the Principal faces her own challenges because of the lack of secretarial support for the school. The Principal answers the phone and greets visitor, parents, district office personnel, and guests, all while trying to carry out the management tasks that are part of the Principal's typical role. There were differing

reasons why the secretary position remains unfilled, but the result has been that the Principal is unavailable to the faculty as much as they would wish.

From the reports in surveys, interviews and observations, there are significant gaps between the leadership needed to improve student performance at Liberty Elementary School and the capacity of the current principal to provide that leadership.

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

No. As indicated in Question 1, sub-question E, the original *Liberty 02-03 School Improvement Plan* was not a product of faculty input to any great extent. The faculty is divided in its commitment to the strategies defined in the plan, with the primary teachers fully embracing the SFA program and the intermediate grade teachers less committed to its use.

At least half the faculty members reported to the Panel Review team that they are only vaguely familiar with the Liberty SIP. Most mentioned that they 'assumed' the plan includes the SFA program which has been a focus of attention for the past year. Teachers in K, 1 and 2 are adopting many of the SFA program elements with enthusiasm, but teachers in grades 3, 4, and 5 are less fully committed to its implementation. The absence of a full time SFA facilitator to provide teacher support and program coordination has been a major impediment to full implementation of SFA at the upper grades.

Faculty perceptions of the school's needs differ somewhat from the areas identified in the SIP. In surveys and interviews, faculty members were asked to name the school's greatest areas of need for improvement. Most mentioned reading as the academic area of greatest need, but many also noted that discipline and attendance were important factors that contribute to poor student performance. In the school's initial 02-03 plan, neither discipline nor attendance was listed as needing attention. The revised plan recently drafted concentrates only on academic needs, focusing most closely on the language needs of Hispanic students. Mathematics, the greatest gap in student achievement according to the school's MCAS results over several years, was not mentioned by faculty, parents, or either SIP version as a targeted improvement area. Several faculty members indicated they were not even aware that the school's performance results on MCAS had declined over the past year.

The widespread lack of familiarity with the school's improvement plan and differences among teachers and administrators about the areas of greatest need raises questions about the effectiveness of the school's improvement efforts. Coupled with the absence of a systematic process for regular review and assessment of school practices, in part due to inadequate staffing for the SFA program, the Panel Review team judged that the school's plan as currently defined are unlikely to lead to improved student achievement.

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

No. Although district-wide goals are in place for 2002-2004 that include support for principals, parents and teachers, there are no indications the Springfield School District has made progress toward those goals or that it is regularly monitoring its own performance. Liberty Elementary School is struggling with inadequate staffing and insufficient leadership and management support. It is not evident that the district has a plan to provide for the specific challenges the school faces. In addition to struggling with its own challenges, Liberty is required to implement four new programs mandated by the district this year, some of which conflict with Liberty's own strategies.

The Springfield School District defined a number of goals for itself for the three year term from 2002 through 2004. Included under Goal 2, "Maximize the performance and productivity of all adult learners in the Springfield Public Schools," are several "Progress Indicators" related to the district's support of its principals.

- ❖ "All school Principals and Assistant Principals will participate in comprehensive leadership development activities that support 'principles of learning'";
- ❖ "All school principals will complete school improvement simulations which include reality-based solutions."; and
- ❖ "One hundred percent of all Springfield administrators will practice the 'principles of learning' in support of student achievement by the end of the three year period."

According to an interview with the Superintendent, the district believes that its new performance evaluation system for principals will serve as a meaningful measure of the district's effectiveness with these efforts. However, the team determined that the district's training in these administrative initiatives has not been effective in producing positive improvements in Liberty's leadership. The Superintendent indicated that the district has been aware of difficulties at Liberty for some time, yet he described no specific interventions to address these problems. The Liberty principal has access to supervisory support as do other Springfield principals, but it appears that support has been inadequate to resolve numerous gaps in management skills.

The leadership concerns at Liberty are aggravated by the inadequate staffing of core positions. The school is working without a secretary, so either the Principal or an aide taken from the classroom takes the responsibility for answering phones, greeting visitors, and scheduling meetings. In the team's interview with the Superintendent, he redirected responsibility for recruiting and hiring a secretary to the Principal. The adoption of the SFA reading program requires a full time facilitator to support teachers and to coordinate the assessment components, but the Principal reported that the Liberty SFA coordinator left early in the year on an emergency leave thus the school has tried to function without her services. As indicated earlier in this report, SFA implementation at the upper elementary grades has been impaired by the absence of a facilitator. The Principal believes the district is unable to hire a replacement for financial reasons. The Superintendent suggested that the vacancy could be filled if the Principal were to make requests to the appropriate office. Inadequate communication between district and the building leader appears to have created extra challenges for Liberty staff and students. In addition to vacant permanent positions, the building is often without sufficient substitute teachers to cover absences, leading the Principal to distribute students to other classes for the day. The district is aware of its lack of adequate substitutes but has not found a way to address this shortage and lessen its impact on student learning opportunities.

The Springfield School District has undertaken a number of revisions in its academic programs over the past two years. Four new programs were approved in June and implemented this year – English Language Learners Plan, Reading Plan, Math/ Science Plan, and a Pupil Progression Policy. Additionally, a new absentee policy has been adopted that requires additional monitoring and reporting of student attendance by each school. While each of these programs addresses important needs throughout the district, they represent a major challenge to the faculty and leadership at Liberty. For example, the district’s Reading Plan includes use of a basal reader and specific grade level benchmarks and progress indicators. According to the Principal and some teachers, the basal reading program overlaps with some elements of SFA, conflicts with others, and requires additional training for staff over and above the SFA training commitment. The Principal recognizes the overload created by the district’s mandates and has directed her staff to focus on SFA at the present time. In contrast, the Superintendent indicated his expectation that Liberty faculty integrate the new reading plan fully into the existing program. The conflict between district and building goals has yet to be addressed and resolved to best serve the needs of Liberty children.

Prior to the current year, the Superintendent indicated that his office did not provide comprehensive reviews of building improvement plans because they were developing a new template for use across the district. The revised improvement planning process was begun in January 2003 with representatives from Liberty participating. The district is adapting the Improvement Mapping process developed by the Department of Education for schools declared underperforming. It is too soon to judge whether the Liberty team will benefit from the new process. As reported in previous sections of this document, early drafts of the revised Liberty SIP retain many of the weaknesses of the initial plan, including weak linkage between the school’s analysis of student needs and its selection of strategies to address those needs.

The Springfield School District has only recently initiated targeted support to Liberty and similar schools in need of improvement beginning at the time of their notification of the Panel Review. In the Panel Review team’s judgment, the district has not met its obligation to Liberty Elementary School students despite several years of declining scores and continuing reports of leadership weaknesses. There is no indication the district has conducted an analysis of the particular needs at Liberty or designed a plan to address those needs through both short and long term support.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Liberty Elementary School staff is in the earliest stages of analyzing student performance results to identify specific areas of student academic needs. Since the school does not have an accurate understanding of the reasons for the fundamental gaps in student learning, it has not yet defined a set of strategies or developed a plan for improvement that is likely to lead to improved student achievement.

There are significant weaknesses in the leadership capacity at Liberty and in the commitment of the staff to particular efforts to address student learning needs. In addition, the Springfield

School District has not yet identified a strategy for providing successful interventions to address the personnel and leadership needs at Liberty, or to resolve critical conflicts between building and district curriculum mandates.

In the judgment of the Panel Review team, Liberty Elementary School does not have an effective plan for improving student performance nor does it have the capacity needed to implement changes in school programs and practices.

**APPENDIX A  
TEAM MEMBERS**

**Dr. Karen Laba**, Project Manager, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

**William Wibel**, Consultant, SchoolWorks; Visiting Practitioner, Harvard Principal's Center,  
Cambridge, MA

**Martha Batten**, Principal, The Downey School, Westwood, MA

**Terri Ann Caffelle**, Curriculum Specialist K-5, Shrewsbury, MA

**Megan Tupa**, Special Education, LEND Fellow, Shriver Center/UMass Medical Center,  
Waltham, MA.

**APPENDIX B**  
**LIBERTY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SPRINGFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS**  
**ON-SITE PANEL REVIEW SCHEDULE**

**Day 1—February 11, 2003**

**All activities take place at the Sheraton, Monarch Place, Springfield**

- 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.
- 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 judgments on key questions.
- 2:00—3:30 p.m.* Panelists meet with Principal Jaynes-Lewis
- 5:00—6 p.m.* Panelists meet with the district Superintendent Burke
- 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.

**Day 2—February 12, 2003**

**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 Centered Decision-Making Team (School Council)
- 8:30 – 9:00 Focus Groups**
- Panelist A – Students  
Panelist B – Parents  
Panelist C – School Department C& I
- Panelist D – Liberty's D.O.E. Planning Team:

**9 – 11 AM Classroom Observations and Interviews**

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

	<b>Panelist A</b>	<b>Panelist B</b>	<b>Panelist C</b>	<b>Panelist D</b>
1:00-1:30	Interview	Document review	Documents	Documents
1:30-2:00	Guidance --	<b>Focus Group:</b> Special Education staff		<b>Focus Group:</b>

*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