

**Panel Report
Candidate Compass School Review
Blackstone Valley Vocational Regional School
Blackstone Valley Vocational Regional School District**

INTRODUCTION

The Program

The Commonwealth Compass Schools Program is one part of the Massachusetts School and District Accountability System. The purpose of the Compass Schools Program is to recognize and celebrate improvement in Massachusetts' schools, and to disseminate information and encourage networking and sharing of ideas, effective practices, and models for success. The program is intended to provide a means for the schools to share their expertise with other schools in the state.

Based on the Cycle II (2001-2002) School Performance and Improvement Ratings issued in December 2002, the Department identified 291 elementary, middle and high schools that showed significant improvement over their Cycle I MCAS test results. These schools were invited to participate in the program by applying for consideration as candidates to serve as 2003 Commonwealth Compass Schools. One hundred and forty-four schools chose to apply by submitting completed two-part applications. Part 1 of the application asked for written responses to three questions on the initiatives they have undertaken to improve student performance that they think have had the most positive impact on their students' performance. Part 2 of the application was an on-line survey asking for a more detailed profile of the school and information on significant changes in recent years. Five high schools and six elementary schools were selected as finalists. Those eleven schools were scheduled for closer review to learn more about their highlighted programs and to determine willingness and capacity to serve in the program. Data and information gathered from the applications, surveys and review process of these schools will be published in a report this fall.

The Commissioner will designate up to eleven schools to serve as 2003 Commonwealth Compass Schools. Compass Schools receive special recognition and a \$10,000 grant to support the participation of their administrators and staff in information sharing and dissemination activities over the next year.

The Report

This report summarizes the findings and analyses of a small team of education professionals during a one-day visit to the Blackstone Valley Vocational High School on 6th May 2003. The report will assist the Commissioner in determining which schools from among those visited will be designated to serve as 2003 Commonwealth Compass Schools.

The Panel evaluated data and written information on the school's performance and improvement efforts, including the school's two-part Compass School application; and then visited the school to meet with school leaders, staff, parents and students and visit classrooms in order to answer the following two key questions:

1. Is this school using effective improvement initiatives that could be replicated in other similarly profiled schools?
2. Are the conditions in place for this school to serve as a model of effective practices and successful improvement initiatives?

The Panel's responses to these two questions frame the report. In the process of answering these questions, the report focuses primarily on the initiatives that the school identified in its application as having had the most positive impact on student performance.

The findings and conclusions presented here are the product of analysis, discussion, and observation, and are based on the evidence made available to the Panel before and during their visit. A list of Panel members who participated in the school panel review is provided in Appendix A. A detailed schedule of the Panel's activities is provided in Appendix B.

Blackstone Valley Technical High School Profile

Enrollment

The Blackstone Valley Technical High School is both a school and a district, serving students in grades 9 through 12. Enrollment at the Blackstone Valley Technical High School remained steady between 1999 and 2002, averaging 860 students. Ninety-seven percent of the student body was White during this time period. Only 12 percent of the school's student population were low-income, and the school has a Targeted Assistance Title I program in place.

Attendance at the Blackstone School between 1998 and 2001 averaged 93 percent. The average number of days absent per student was 12 percent. Retention's during this period averaged less than one percent. In-school suspensions between 1998 and 2001 fluctuated between 24.9 and 4.6 percent, while out-of-school suspensions averaged seven percent. The exclusion rate during this period averaged one percent.

Staffing

At the Blackstone Valley Technical High School, there are 78 classroom teachers, 33 paraprofessionals, 10 specialist teachers, 10 administrators and nine guidance counselors. All teachers at this school are certified in the subjects they teach. Twenty-three teachers have five or fewer years of experience, while 46 have 15 or more years of experience.

MCAS Overview

Students at the Blackstone Valley High School are tested (the MCAS in grade 10) in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. In contrast to Cycle I (1999-2000), the school made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in both years of Cycle II (2001-2002).

Student Performance in English Language Arts

In Cycle II, the school received a performance rating of *Low* in ELA for its Proficiency Index (PI) of 69.2 in grade 10. Improvement was rated *Above Target* for its 20.5-point increase over Cycle I. Participation rates in the ELA test in Cycle II were 100 percent in 2001 and 99 percent in 2002.

In Cycle II, the Blackstone High School saw greater percentages of its students scoring in the Proficient level with a sharp decrease in the proportions failing as compared to Cycle I. In 2001, only one percent of Regular Education students scored at the Advanced level of performance, 16 percent at Proficient, 55 percent at the Needs Improvement level, and 29 percent failed. In 2000, two percent of students were Advanced, 12 percent were Proficient, 47 percent placed in Needs Improvement, and 39 percent failed. In the first year of Cycle II, two percent of students were Advanced, the percentage of Proficient students rose to 31 percent, as did those at the Needs Improvement level to 57 percent. The percentage of those who failed fell to 10 percent. In 2002, five percent of Regular Education students scored Advanced, 34 percent were Proficient, 51 percent in Needs Improvement, and 10 percent failed.

The performance of Special Education students at Blackstone High School in Cycle II was characterized by a lower percentage of students at the Failing level and an increasing percentage scoring at the Needs Improvement performance level. In 1999, only four percent of Special Education students were Proficient, 19 percent were at the Needs Improvement level, while 77 percent failed the ELA test. In 2000, there were no Proficient students, 13 percent were in Needs Improvement, while the majority (87 percent) failed. In the first year of Cycle II, nine percent of Special Education students were Proficient, 32 percent in Needs Improvement, and 59 percent failed. In 2002, nine percent of students in this subgroup scored at the Proficient level of performance, the percentage of scores in the Needs Improvement category rose to 68 percent, while those failing fell to 23 percent.

Student Performance in Mathematics

In Cycle II, the Blackstone School received a performance rating of *Low* for its Proficiency Index of 65.5, and performance was rate *Above Target*. The school increased its PI in Cycle II by 23.1 points compared to Cycle I. Participation rates in the mathematics portion of the test in Cycle II were 100 percent in 2001 and 99 percent in 2002.

In comparison to Cycle I, fewer Regular Education students failed the mathematics portion of the test and greater proportions scored at the Advanced and Proficient levels. In the first year of

Cycle I, only four percent of Regular Education students scored at the Advanced level of performance, nine percent were Proficient, 20 percent at the Needs Improvement level, and 68 percent failed. In 2000, ten percent of students were Advanced, 15 percent Proficient, 34 percent in Needs Improvement, and 41 percent failed. In 2001, nine percent of students were Advanced, 30 percent scored at the Proficient level, 47 percent at Needs Improvement, and 15 percent failed. In 2002, the percentage of Advanced students rose to 14 percent, 24 percent of students were Proficient, and 43 percent were in Needs Improvement and 18 percent failed.

In 1999, there were no Proficient Special Education students, and 93 percent failed the mathematics portion of the MCAS test. In 2000, there were seven percent Proficient students, 15 percent of students scored at the Needs Improvement level, and 78 percent failed. In 2001, six percent of students in this subgroup were Proficient; those in warning rose to 41 percent, while those failing fell to 53 percent. In 2002, two percent of all Special Education students at the school were Advanced, nine percent Proficient, 32 percent in Needs Improvement, and 57 percent failed.

Panel Responses To The Key Questions

KEY QUESTION 1: Is This School Using Effective Improvement Initiatives That Could Be Replicated In Other Similarly Profiled Schools?

Blackstone Valley Vocational High School is using effective improvement initiatives that could be replicated at other vocational/technical schools with a similar profile. The principal initiative the school has developed is the cross-curricular teaching of reading and Math. This together with organizational changes and changes in staff structuring have had a significant impact on student achievement. The number of students in the "Failing" category has shifted from 85% to just 2% over four years. Complementing the schools implementation of its improvement initiatives, the Superintendent and the school leadership team share a common philosophy and a close working relationship that has driven the improvement efforts. The faculty also shares the same philosophy and is fully involved in all aspects of decision-making including staffing appointments.

A. Which improvement initiatives have had the greatest impact on student performance results?

The most significant improvement initiatives have been the decision to invest in the teaching of reading and math across the curriculum and the adoption of radical measures for ELA recovery in a school where up to 70% of freshmen arrive with chronically low reading scores. The ensuing success has significantly raised student morale. Both in and out-of- school suspensions declined significantly between 1999 and 2002 and attendance has steadily improved over the same period. Although overall performance is still low, there are fewer students in the failing category and AYP is well above target.

The school has involved all staff over a nine-year period in introducing modified instructional objectives. Basic literacy work has been integrated into the vocational curriculum and created much needed time within the academic curriculum to align the content with state curriculum frameworks.

Every teacher has a computer with the same programs for keeping student data, which is regularly accessed and used in decision making. There is also a focus on technology across the curriculum for students and 'respect' as a cross curricular theme. There are numerous opportunities for experiential, integrated work. For example, one group of students is currently involved in building a house. Another group is working with local elementary schools. Students create portfolios as a requirement for graduation, which bear testimony to this integrated work, including technology. The portfolios are highly diverse and comprehensive, reflecting hard work by the students and thoughtful planning and guidance from teachers. All portfolio components are available on the schools website and student work is stored electronically. This allows students electronic access to their projects from anywhere.

The essential outcome of the school's successful work is the virtual absence of an academic-vocational divide. From Superintendent to newly recruited teacher, there is a culture that has been grown organically at Blackstone Valley focusing all professional work on student success. This has paid high dividends.

B. How did the school plan their improvement initiatives and put them into practice?

The current Superintendent was recruited nine years ago and brought with him a wealth of experience, including academic research into curriculum trends in eighty vocational schools. This enabled the leadership team to develop a time-line for change that has been successfully implemented and reviewed. Over the years it has included the following key elements: the formation of a leadership team including a Dean of Students, Curriculum Coordinators and Director of Quality Initiatives; the introduction of 60 hours of contractual professional development time outside the working day; TQM staff development model; the introduction of long block-scheduling and doubling Math and ELA instruction time at 9th and 10th grade.

The student calendar days were increased to 193 which were phased in over three years, thus allowing a half day closure on alternate Wednesdays although this is not always taken. This allows opportunities for staff to meet either in team clusters or in other configurations including meetings of cross discipline department chairs. These professional meetings frequently involve data analysis. There are regular senior leadership and school council meetings, too, but it seems that the change agenda is truly driven from grass roots as a result of sensible arrangements that allow professional exchange and discussion.

Cross curriculum reading and math initiatives, that involve vocational and academic teachers planning together and the John Collins writing program have been systematically introduced over this period. For example a carpentry instructor has introduced "job sheets" that require

students to write quite extensively about their work and machine procedures. Completing the job sheet also involves form-filling skills that mirror some of the test taking skills that many of the students lack. These instructional initiatives were designed co-jointly with a member of the English department. Many similar examples were found in other areas.

To support the integration of reading and in particular to support students with chronically poor reading skills on entry, three full time reading teachers and three reading paraprofessionals have been appointed to work with recovering readers (those that are 2 - 3 grades below chronological age) in classes of 15-18 using the Success Maker Reading Program. To support raising math achievement there is a program of the month and the Jason Project that provides practical application for math theory.

All new teachers are mentored in cross-curricular strategies and in the processes that enable initiatives to be developed at the school. The initiative for a new cross-curricular offering comes from staff –often one person with an idea reaches out to someone on the other side (academic or vocational) to develop the initiative.

C. Does the school think these initiatives can be successfully used in similar schools? Why?

The school believes that these initiatives can be replicated in similar schools. In particular, the Principal feels strongly that to restructure a reading department to meet the needs of recovering readers for those with chronically low reading scores could be replicated to great benefit elsewhere. The same is true of other cross the curriculum initiatives.

Blackstone Valley Vocational School has enjoyed high staff stability over the past ten years and dramatically increasing student success (as measured by transition to work and MCAS achievement and decreasing suspension and drop out rates). The school and district administrators link this success squarely with detailed strategic planning, quality management and the creation of a strong sense of joint ownership by students, academic and vocational staff. They believe this can be replicated and that teachers in all vocational schools can espouse such a culture. The staff recognizes that changes in the attitudes and philosophies of other faculties may be required in order to foster a similar school culture. The school feels that this remains a possibility as long as the effort is supported by strategic, site-based professional development.

KEY QUESTION 2: Are The Conditions In Place For This School To Serve As A Model Of Effective Practices And Successful Improvement Initiatives?

Yes. The conditions are in place for Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational School to serve as a model of effective practices and successful improvement initiatives. The leadership, faculty and students are enthusiastic about their work and could articulate the reasons for their success clearly. They are also aware of special features (for example, the fiscal and operational autonomy that results from serving thirteen Massachusetts communities) that may not be so easy to replicate everywhere. They do not presume to have all the answers but are committed to taking

the next steps to raise the level of student performance across all departments with the same determined planning and action already displayed.. In this respect any school visiting Blackstone Valley would have the advantage of seeing 'professional work in progress' and a culture where teaching and learning permeate that culture.

A. Do leadership and staff have a shared understanding and use a common language to describe the changes/initiatives that have led to improvements in teaching and learning?

The district and school leadership and the school faculty speak with one voice about the success of their innovative strategies that have all but raised the bar of the whole school population above the MCAS 'failing' category.

The leadership at both district and school levels is highly visible and there is a strong sense of working with purpose to a common vision. Actions and beliefs are consistent with the mission statement and consistently articulated in all parts of the building, A common culture of integration and inclusion is shared by students, staff and leadership and each identifies the same initiatives as having impact on students' achievement.

B. How effectively do leadership and staff articulate the connections between the specific changes and improvement initiatives they have implemented, and the gains made in student achievement?

The involvement of the whole faculty in decision making - particularly in terms of planning the integrated curriculum - forces teachers and administrators to make the connection between long-term initiatives, changed instructional objectives and student learning goals.

The staff refers to data to demonstrate student achievement in all areas where basic skills are integrated. However, its use is particularly evident in reading. They are also able to draw on specific examples of instruction or assignments that relate to helping students develop the "know how" skills to succeed.

C. Is there a school wide focus on, and sufficient staff investment in, continued improvement of student performance?

The leadership team is well aware of the next challenge. This is to develop curricula and classrooms that will challenge students to still higher achievement. There are plans for additional integrated standards based academic and vocational curricula, with shops aligning to national certification standards. The Superintendent is keen to support faculty in developing instructional methods that, like the Jason Project, challenge students to learn co operatively, experientially and result in higher order thinking and questioning skills.

Investment in 'respect across the curriculum' has paid off not only in enabling student success but also in a calm and orderly building where student management is made to look easy. The school is not complacent about these achievements, and every opportunity is taken to support the

interests and aspirations of individual students, both through portfolio review and one-on-one tutorial.

D. Does the school appear to have the capacity to host site visits and to participate in various activities to share effective strategies and practices with other schools in the state?

Blackstone valley Vocational School staff and the district's administration communicate well orally about their initiatives, and Power Point (Microsoft ©) presentations already exist that clearly articulate the progress the school has made on a ten year time-line. There is also a hard copy binder that goes into more depth about the change initiatives that could be shared with other schools with minimal alteration. Teachers are excited about the difference these initiatives have made to their success and to the quality of their professional lives. They are keen to share with others their experiences of cross-curricular work and the instructional methods that they have developed to support it. The student voice could be clearly articulated through work-portfolios or by oral presentation at which many students are adept.

E. Does the Panel recommend that this school be designated to serve as a Commonwealth Compass School?

Yes, within the guidelines set for selection. Blackstone Valley Vocational School has implemented carefully planned organizational and curricular changes over a ten-year period from which other similar schools could learn. In particular the integration of ELA and math within the vocational and academic departments has helped raise MCAS scores dramatically over the last four years. Teachers are excited about the difference these initiatives have made to their success and to the quality of their professional lives. They are keen to share with others their experience of implementing and sustaining a cross curricular success-for-all plan, and they have the capacity to do so.

CONCLUSION

There are few qualifications to recommending Blackstone Valley Vocational School for Compass School status. The progress they have made is highly visible in the data and fully borne out by the working community who are able to clearly articulate the reasons for success. Perhaps the one qualification is that in some areas the innovative work is already so well embedded that particularly faculty members do not immediately articulate the actual steps taken. Individual student success within vocational education settings is a complex concept. In sharing the strategies that have resulted in the collective success of its students, the school will need to create a package clearly documenting particular steps or highlighting processes in particular areas. For example, to be of real benefit to others they will need to spell out *how* they set up reading, writing and math across the curriculum or *how* effected new teaching strategies or *how* they integrated projects.

The school should also be prepared to demonstrate how their work is continuing and in particular how they are addressing the need for professional development in standards - based instruction, and how they are utilizing data to inform school improvement plan

APPENDIX A Panel Members

Peter Davies, Chair, Consultant, Class Measures

David Copice, Vice Principal, Attleboro High School, Attleboro Public Schools

Joanne Grenier, Director of Instruction, Marlboro Public Schools

Pat Costa, Principal, O'Donnell Middle School, Stoughton

Candidate Compass School Panel Review Schedule

All activities take place at the school. Note that this schedule is intended to guide the development of the schedule to ensure that the required elements of the included. Exact timing of the specific activities may vary considerably from school to school.

7:30—8:00 a.m. Panelists meet to prepare for day

8:00—8:30 a.m. Panelists meet with the Principal

8:30—9:00 a.m. Panelists meet with focus groups

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

11 a.m.—12:30 p.m. 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	Panelists E
1:00-1:30	Teacher	Focus Group 1	Teacher	Focus Group 3	Teacher Focus Group 5
1:30-2:00	Teacher	Focus Group 2	Teacher	Focus Group 4	Teacher Focus Group 6

2:00—2:15p.m. Closing meeting with the principal to discuss next steps in the process (all panelists are present)

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

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

1. Classroom Observations .Panelists will observe two classes each, followed by individual interviews with the teachers observed. The purpose of the classroom observations in candidate Compass Schools is to learn the extent to which the improvement initiatives the school has described as having the most positive impact on student achievement are in evidence in the classroom and throughout the school. Observers will also gather additional detail/information on those specific programs and practices.
2. Individual Teacher Interviews The purpose of the teacher interview that follows the panelist’s observation of that teacher’s classroom is to:
 - Clarify the evaluator’s impressions of the classroom dynamic and learning environment
 - Determine each teachers’ understanding of the initiatives cited in the application as having had the most positive impact on student achievement; and the extent to which the improvement initiatives are guiding their classroom practice (for instance, curriculum, instruction and assessment).
 - Determine what has changed at the school over the past three years.
 - Determine each teacher’s role in implementing the improvements made to student performance at the school.
3. Teacher Focus Groups The purpose of the teacher focus groups is to:
 - Determine each teachers’ understanding of the initiatives cited in the application as having had the most positive impact on student achievement; and the extent to which the improvement initiatives are guiding their classroom practice (for instance, curriculum, instruction and assessment).
 - Determine what has changed at the school over the past three years.
 - Determine each teacher’s role in implementing the improvements made to student performance at the school.

Taken together, the observations, individual teacher interviews, and teacher focus groups will provide a comprehensive view of the staff’s understanding of, and participation and investment in, the programs and strategies to improve student performance.