

Panel Report
Candidate Compass School Review
Academy Avenue Elementary School
Weymouth Public Schools

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 [School] on [date, 2002]. 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 review is provided in Appendix A. A detailed schedule of the Panel's activities is provided in Appendix B.

Academy Avenue School Profile

Enrollment

The Academy Avenue School is one of 13 schools in Weymouth and 10 elementary schools in the district. Between 1999 and 2002, an average of 316 students were enrolled at the school. Ninety four percent of the school's student population during that time was White, with an average of 10 percent being of low-income families.

Attendance at the Academy Avenue School between 1998 and 2001 averaged 96 percent, with the average number of days absent being seven. During that time, there were no exclusions, in-school or out-of-school suspensions, and only 0.6 percent of students were retained.

Staffing

At the Academy Avenue School, there are 14 classroom teachers, three paraprofessionals, three specialist teachers, one administrator and one guidance counselor. All teachers at the school are certified in the subjects they teach. Eight teachers have five or fewer years of experience, while five have more than 15 years of experience.

MCAS Overview

Students at the Academy Avenue School are tested in the MCAS in grade 3 in English language arts (ELA) and in grade 4 in ELA and mathematics. In Cycle II (2001-2002), the school was found to have Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in both ELA and mathematics.

Student Performance in English Language Arts

In Cycle II, the Academy Avenue School received a performance rating of *Very High* for its proficiency index of 98.2 in ELA. For exceeding its target proficiency index, the school received an improvement rating of *Above Target*. Student participation rates in the MCAS testing program in ELA in Cycle II were 100 percent in 2001 and 97 percent in 2002.

In Cycle II, there were fewer Regular Education students at the Academy Avenue School scoring at the Needs Improvement level and most scores were in either the Advanced or the Proficient category. In 1999, 28 percent of Regular Education students scored in the Advanced category, 60 percent scored in Proficient, and 12 percent in Needs Improvement. In 2000, 15 percent of students performed at the Advanced level, 63 percent were in Proficient, and 22 percent in Needs Improvement. In the first year of Cycle II, the percentage of students scoring in the Advanced category doubled to 31 percent compared to the previous year. Sixty three percent of students scored in the Proficient category, with six percent in Needs Improvement. In 2002, 36 percent of students scored in the Advanced category, 62 percent in Proficient, and two percent in Needs Improvement.

In Cycle II, the number of Special Education students tested in ELA did not meet the minimum sample size.

Student Performance in Mathematics

In Cycle II, the Academy Avenue School received a performance rating of *Very High*, having attained a proficiency index of 98.0 in mathematics. The school earned a rating of *Above Target* for an increase in its proficiency index of 14.5 points. Participation rates in the mathematics portion of the MCAS in Cycle II were 100 percent in 2001 and 97 percent in 2002.

The performance of Regular Education students at the Academy Avenue Elementary School in Cycle II was characterized by increasing proportions of students scoring in the Advanced category. In 1999, 13 percent of Regular Education students scored in the Advanced category in mathematics, 38 percent scored in Proficient, 44 percent scored in Needs Improvement, and four percent in Warning. In 2000, 24 percent students scored in the Advanced level of performance, 50 percent scored at the Proficient level, 22 percent scored in Needs Improvement, and four percent scored in Warning. In 2001, the proportion of students who performed in the Advanced category jumped to 51 percent, more than doubling the previous year's percentage. Thirty-nine percent of the 4th grade students scored in Proficient, and 10 percent in the Warning category. In 2002, 53 percent of the students scored in Advanced, 42 percent in Proficient and just six percent scored in Needs Improvement.

In Cycle II, the number of Special Education students tested in mathematics did not meet the minimum sample size.

Panel Response To The Key Questions

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

The Panel found several concrete programs and practices underway at the Academy Avenue Primary School that could be replicated in other similarly profiled schools and adapted to a variety of schools. The comprehensive use of standards-based assessments at the school, grade and classroom levels to help shape curriculum and instruction could serve as a model, especially in schools that already have core curriculums that are aligned with state learning standards.

The Action Research project highlighted by the school incorporates and helped cultivate these practices throughout the school even as it developed a vocabulary for talking about student work and a common understanding of performance standards for their students. The way that teachers in the school have come to use writing across the curriculum as a lever for improving student performance in all areas could also be adapted in a variety of settings. The curriculum materials, assignments and assessments that teachers have been sharing with each other could, if presented as such, constitute a toolbox from which schools could choose the strategies that meet their students' needs or supplement their own curricula and assessment practices.

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

The Principal credits the significant improvements in student performance in Cycle II (2001-2002) to the teacher as researcher approach to tracking instructional effectiveness by regularly looking at student work and student performance data. Begun in 2000, this initiative seems to have provided the capstone for an evolutionary process of improvement underway in the school over the past ten years.

Action research in this case means that teachers look at student work together and then make targeted revisions to the curriculum, and vary instruction, where needed. Teachers have worked collaboratively over the past three years to design tools to analyze and track student progress and to identify students' strengths and weaknesses at the 3rd and 4th grades, using monthly writing prompts that mirror open-ended response questions on MCAS tests. The results of this research have spiraled down through the grade levels as participating teachers share their findings with the rest of the staff.

In the school's application and in her leadership report, the Principal points to this research initiative—with concrete strategies that invest teachers in expanding and enhancing their students' writing and critical thinking skills—as the single most powerful tool for improving their performance in English language arts and in mathematics.

1. Does the available data support the school's reported impact in the area intended?

Yes. The level and the nature of the improvements in student performance in both ELA and

mathematics in Cycle II strongly support the Principal's emphasis on the Action Research model as a structure for improving expository writing in their success. The Cycle II School Performance and Improvement Rating Report shows the school's already high performance and steady progress over the five years since the first MCAS administration in 1998 rising fairly steadily, with a notable improvement in both content areas in 2001-2002. During the first cycle, the school decreased and finally eliminated student scores in the Warning category at the 4th grade. The improvement in Cycle II is characterized primarily by the movement of most students into the Proficient and Advanced categories.

A nine point increase on the Proficiency Index for ELA and a 14.5 point boost in mathematics far exceeded the expectations set by the state (1.5 points in ELA and 2.4 points in mathematics). By 2002, all but two of the fourth graders tested in ELA and all but three tested in mathematics scored in either the Proficient or Advanced categories. Academy Avenue is already very close to meeting the ambitious goal of No Child Left Behind to have all of its students performing at Proficient levels by 2014.

Clearly, the move toward a school-wide focus on writing and critical thinking in all content areas, especially in the importance of writing and explaining in math, beginning 1994, the adoption of an ELA curriculum that reflects the learning standards introduced with the curriculum frameworks provided a solid academic foundation for the success of the changes over the past two or three years.

However, the Action Research project appears to be the capstone that completed the structure for improvement by pulling the elements together and directing teacher efforts toward adopting instructional strategies targeted to fill specific gaps in student learning. The targeted nature of the curricular enhancements and/or supplements that teachers described making during the past two years based looking at student work, and their ongoing and increasingly coordinated efforts across the grade levels to integrate and spiral the curriculum have paid off in the very high performance of their students.

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

In 2000, the Principal at Academy initiated an Action Research model as part of a district mentoring program for new teachers. Funded by a Teacher Quality Grant from the Massachusetts Department of Education, the goal of the project was, in the words of the principal/grant writer "to create professional opportunities for new and veteran teachers to learn together. What the teachers would learn was to use student data effectively to improve student performance." In the first year, three teachers from Academy were among the 12 from the district who participated. From September through December of 2000, the group met twice a month and trained under the guidance of a consultant paid by the grant. They decided to focus their efforts on improving expository writing because it was considered an area of weakness. Beginning in January 2001, the meetings were held once a month and usually ran from 3—6 PM. Teachers received PDPs for participating in the project. Beginning this year, the building research group is paid a stipend by the district.

This year, after two years the original group knew this research project was effective and wanted to involve more teachers and formed new groups at the building level more teachers could be

involved. It also allowed the individual schools to focus on specific building concerns. For example, one of the schools involved spent this year studying students writing in mathematics.

The research consists of looking at student work and other student performance results to identify specific student learning needs. The action is using what you learn from the data to target strategies to address those needs, and, perhaps most importantly, to track the success of those strategies by looking at the students' work again. Each of the teachers brings samples of student work from the high, medium and low levels, selected from a monthly writing prompt given to the whole class. These samples of student work along with anchor papers from previous MCAS tests formed the basis for discussions that help build a common understanding of standards for student work. The participating teachers then share their findings with the rest of the staff, and they all work together to figure out ways to address them. The group also breaks down the MCAS results each year by learning standard, type of question, and item to analyze areas of student weakness. They use performance data from the 2nd grade Iowa Reading tests, and their own ongoing classroom assessments to track the effectiveness of new programs or strategies and make adjustments or changes if needed.

Teachers involved in the research share their findings and tools they are using to track students, and any new materials and strategies that seemed to be effective at bimonthly breakfast staff meetings. An example of this is when the group saw the need to improve students' organization skills, the Principal purchased four square books for every teacher and asked them to try using the strategy at their grade level. The group also shared the monthly prompts and assessment rubrics they developed. Teachers at each grade level then developed and administered monthly writing prompts to their students to assess the effectiveness of the tool at the classroom level. The Principal scored the assessments and discussed results with individual teachers.

There also appears to be a shared commitment to doing what is necessary in their own classrooms to ensure that all of their students continue to improve. In classroom visits, interviews and in focus groups, Panelists heard teachers refer to their students' needs as the guiding force behind specific alterations or changes in their instruction. Teachers described the ways that they incorporated elements from, for instance Chicago Math and Hands-on Equations and Scott-Foresman, and why; and shared some of the curriculum materials that support the particular strategies they are using at their grade level and in their classroom to meet those needs.

Teachers' written responses on the teacher survey echoed this characterization of their curriculum. In answer to the question: "What are you doing differently in your teaching/classroom practice that you think has had the most positive impact on student performance?" many of the 16 teachers listed discrete pieces of several programs to meet individual student learning needs and styles. Reporting, they were, for example: "Using the best of several math programs and writing development programs." "Identifying individual needs and addressing weakness through a variety of instructional strategies." "Implementing the best of several math programs." "Incorporating a variety of programs in the Reading Curriculum. The Open Court creates a literature rich environment with a strong emphasis on phonemic awareness, Jr. Great Books is a program for interpretive reading, writing and discussion. We also read a variety of novels. I am doing a variety of writing activities in all curriculum areas."

The Panel found consistent evidence that standards-based assessment is central to teaching and

learning at the school and drives curricular decisions. Teachers use a variety of regular assessment tools in the classroom to gauge their students' progress and to guide curricular enhancements. Rubrics, sometimes customized for specific assignments, keep expectations clear. The monthly writing prompts administered in each grade level, and both the district math series of Scott-Foresman and the Chicago Math program now in use in every classroom also provide consistent and ongoing assessment of student progress.

Teachers also described looking for opportunities to integrate content during the day, often through different kinds of writing assignments. In one 2nd grade classroom an ELA class had students with laptops categorize animals from the graphic of the desert projected on a screen using science-based software. As she clicked and read the description, she would ask the students to tell her what kind of animal this was and then asked the students to classify them in preparation for the students to do their own research into one of the animals on their laptops at an Enchanted Learning site. In mathematics, as in all curricular areas, writing is seen as a way to help students understand and internalize what they are learning and to help teachers keep track of student progress. Teachers shared samples of various kinds of student work, for instance 1st grade classroom assessments in math, samples of the daily Continental Math problems, 3rd grade math journals, and curricular materials from Chicago Math to help explain what they were using to teach or to reinforce particular skills that their assessments indicated were weaknesses.

Less clear to the Panel was exactly how teachers were, in their terms, targeting differentiated instruction to meet individual student learning needs. The Panel visited eight classrooms during the morning of the on-site review. Students in one math class were using manipulatives. Another class moved into a circle and alternated reading aloud as the characters in the story with discussion. With one exception, the Panel found orderly classrooms of an average of 17 well-behaved, attentive children receiving whole class instruction. During subsequent discussions with teachers, and with the Principal, teachers seemed to be using differentiation to mean using the same curricular materials and learning activities. Teachers reported providing extra work for those students who finish an assignment early or tiering their instruction with content and activities of differing levels of difficulty or complexity for different students. Teachers also reported using reinforcement and extension assignments. According to the Principal, "Our goal is to not have students working on anything they have already mastered."

The work of the third and fourth grade research group will continue next year. In September the K-2 teachers plan to begin a research project that will focus on developing fluency in early readers. We are in the process of hiring reading specialists to conduct workshops in the fall a member from the original group will facilitate the K-2 meetings and help them develop appropriate tools for analyzing and tracking students' progress and the instructional strategies they use to improve students' skills.

Background/Context

The action research work and the centrality of ongoing assessment and revision at Academy may have helped foster and enhance the flexible approach to a "living" standards-based curriculum that has been developing over the past few years. While it may be more difficult to duplicate, the balance Academy appears to have struck between clear and measurable standards for all of their students' work and the trust that individual teachers are best suited to modify the curriculum for

the needs of the class before them is worth elaborating somewhat.

Teachers are currently using a combination of elements from several programs to address specific learning gaps in both English language arts and mathematics. Such curricular enhancements or “customizations” at the classroom level are primarily additions or supplements to articulated standards and a core curriculum in ELA and mathematics. From around 1994 to 97, the entire staff was involved in mapping each content area K-4, funded by a Time and Learning Grant. The Principal and teachers created a building level ELA curriculum guide and began work on a mathematics guide, which ended with changes introduced in the newly published Frameworks. The Principal describes this work as the first step in setting higher expectations for all students.

In English language arts, teachers begin with the district provided schools with ELA “benchmarks”. The benchmarks boil down the standards to knowledge and skills that students should acquire by the end of each grade level. For example, from the benchmarks for Grade 1, learning standard 19: “students will write with a clear focus, coherent organization and sufficient detail. Recommended activities: brainstorm, graphic organizers, phonetic spelling, beginning middle and end, write or dictate questions or directions.” Teachers use John Collins Writing across the curriculum in all grades, and a Four Square program which helps students plan and organize compositions. Process writing for development of voice, point of view, and awareness of different approaches for different audiences is also used. Teachers reported working with students on essays over time, allowing for revision. Students also spend some time each week writing practice tests. Several teachers also reported on their surveys that they are doing a lot of modeling of types of writing for their students. As a fourth grade teacher put it, “Writing is learning.”

In mathematics, teachers had already been sharing and incorporating the strategies of Marilyn Burns in their classrooms since 1994, as part of their initial work implementing the curriculum frameworks and developing a manipulative-based math program. In 1998, the school adopted the Chicago Everyday Math and Hands-on Equations/Algebra as Child’s Play programs. Hands-on introduces students to algebraic concepts through concrete activities. The Scott Foresman-Addison Wesley series was purchased by the district in 1999. By 2001, all of these programs were in use in all of the classrooms.

Most teachers have received training in Chicago Everyday Math and in using Open Court. District personnel reported that work done on three in-service days are left to the Principal’s discretion. On the Factors Affecting School Performance Survey, the Principal reports that 12 hours per year of training are provided to 12 teachers in mathematics and 20 hours per year provided 14 teachers in ELA.

Teachers report being evaluated by the Principal twice a year, one announced observation in November and one unannounced observation during a set time period. Along with daily walk-throughs and informal drop-in visits, the Principal reported on the survey of Factors Affecting School Performance, she spends approximately 20 hours per month in classrooms observing instruction. The Principal meets with the teachers and provides feedback after both visits. Teachers establish their own professional goals for the coming year. The Principal occasionally stops by for classroom visits. Teachers reported visiting other teachers’ classrooms as needed,

usually at the same grade level, for modeling of strategies, and for sharing ideas of how to present new material. According to the school's survey, teachers spend an average of 1 hour a month visiting other teacher's classrooms.

In addition, the time spent on mathematics has been increased substantially over the years. In 1994 30-45 minutes a day of math instruction was delivered K-4. As teachers began to implement math journals and focus more on problem-solving, instruction time increased to roughly 45 minutes to an hour by 1998. With the full implementation of Chicago Math in 2001, instructional time was increased again to 60 minutes a day for grades 1 and 2, and to 90 minutes a day for grades 3 and 4. Teachers report spreading this instruction throughout the day and integrating it with their lessons in other content areas when possible.

It should also be noted that the school supplements the regular instructional program in several ways that are geared to developing test-taking strategies and skills and building student confidence. Since 1999, the school has received some funding from the district's Academic Support Services Program Grant from the Department for extended day academic support. Sixteen third grade students and 48 fourth grade students are taking advantage of these programs this year. The entire fourth grade is invited each year to participate in an after school test prep class led by Academy teachers, supported by Parent Council funding. The school reports that 70 student have been receiving two hours per week in English language arts. Beginning in 2000, 60 students have received 2 hours of additional support a week in mathematics. Students having difficulties worked in a small group of five with one teacher. There was also a homework club for 12 third graders who had poor organizational skills and problems completing homework assignments. A Learning Express class of 24 capable students.

In addition to the math problem of the day done school-wide, for the past two years, all students in grades 2-4 compete in the Continental math. At grade four there are two levels of the competition. Fourth graders participate in five meets during the year, 2nd and 3rd graders participate in three meets.

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

The Principal clearly thinks that other schools could benefit, as did Academy, from the introduction of the principles and the concrete work of action research, which calls for teachers of all ranges of experience to learn together about their students' learning needs and work to meet them. The teachers think that the frequent and various kinds of assessment use to track students' progress and the strategic selection of material and methods to address the weaknesses identified are the key to the school's continuous improvement.

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

The Panel found most of the conditions in place for this school to serve as a model of effective practices and successful improvement initiatives, particularly the Action Research model they have chosen to highlight and their flexible approach to adapting curriculum programs and materials to suit student needs. The school has demonstrated the positive effects of ongoing and clear communication about the standards for teaching and learning and the methods for achieving them on student performance.

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 Principal and staff clearly have a shared understanding of what they are doing and why they are doing it, as evidenced in written materials submitted by the school, in teacher surveys, focus groups with the School Council and district personnel, and interviews and focus groups with teachers. There is a general consensus that the intensive focus on various kinds of writing activities in all content areas, as both a means and the measure of student learning has been key to their success in raising students performance. The Principal and staff also emphasize the identification of specific student weaknesses or gaps in learning through ongoing assessment, and then targeting strategies and materials to fill those gaps, as an ongoing process for continuing to match their curriculum and instruction to their students' needs and sustain the improvements that they have made.

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 Principal points to the Action Research project as the institution of a systematic and regular use of assessment data to improve student performance. She credits the program with introducing a new level of specificity to the processes of identifying and targeting strategies to particular gaps in student learning and following up with ongoing tracking of the effectiveness of instruction. The teachers tended to articulate the specific elements involved in the process of tracking the effectiveness of their instruction, including using ongoing assessment to figure out what their students needed in order to help them meet the learning standards.

More work could be done to articulate and document the Action Research project, especially in drawing explicit connections between the particular student learning needs identified by the group, the specific strategies implemented, and the link back to specific improvements they have or have not effected. This would greatly facilitate sharing this information in a clear and coherent form, both internally and with other schools. Although the staff and Principal use the terms consistently and appear to understand what they mean by them, they could be clearer about what the differentiation of instructional strategies looks like in their school.

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

A core component of the teacher as researcher model is the use of student performance results to gauge the success of changes to curriculum and instruction. In addition to MCAS tests, the school administers ITBS to 2nd graders as well as the monthly writing prompts already discussed. Recent student work linked to the content and goals of the assignment is displayed throughout the school.

One of the key elements in this school's success is the extent to which regular communications about teaching and learning reportedly figure in the professional culture at the school. The practical work initiated by the action research project appears to have helped further focused and enhanced the staff's sense of improvement as a common goal. There is no common planning time for teachers and no formal grade level meetings. The Principal holds two bagel breakfast staff meetings per month to ensure regular school-wide communication. Virtually all of the teachers reported sharing information and instructional materials with each other on a regular basis, often daily with their grade level colleagues. These discussions usually take place before or after school,

Within a framework of coherent standards and ongoing assessment, teachers are granted the freedom from a "coverage" system or the strictures of following one packaged program and entrusted with professional responsibility for figuring out what needs to be taught and teaching it. Frequent and clear communication is essential to making this flexibility with the instructional program work. It also appears to foster and maintain a collegial atmosphere of common purpose among a staff that talks like a community of learners.

The School Council and the Principal are thinking and talking about what comes next in their ongoing work to sustain the current level of student performance and continue to enhance the instructional program. Among the new initiatives in the School Improvement Plan, dated May, 2003 are expansion of the action research work to include examination of effective reading practices, integrate new social studies curriculum into reading program at each grade level, and developing family game kits to strengthen students' basic math skills.

According to the Principal, next year they will extend the action research project into grades 1 and 2, with a focus on reading and fluency. The assessments indicate that students need to read more nonfiction, responding to facts and summarizing them.

Teachers send home weekly and monthly calendars, and each student gets a homework packet at the beginning of the week, which parents must sign upon completion. The Principal sends out a monthly school newsletter which informs parents of what their kids are doing academically in each grade as well as the standard announcements and information.

In a focus group, parents articulated pride in the school, the Principal and the staff. They pointed to the way the school targeted program areas, followed through, and articulated student learning objectives. They reported that they understood what was expected of the students, and were able to use and reinforce the same language that the teachers were using in the classroom at home. They also reported seeing improvement in their childrens' writing and math over the past couple of years.

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?

Yes. Teachers have had experience presenting their action research work at the International Reading Association's 2002 conference. On that occasion the staff presented concrete methods for improving student writing and shared a model for analyzing and tracking students' writing growth. They provided attendees with samples of student work along with the specific strategies used to strengthen student writing. The rubrics used to score monthly writing prompts were explained and the tools used to track student progress were shared.

While it is not emphasized by the Principal or staff, other schools could learn from the staff at Academy how they focus on writing and critical thinking in math, increase math instructional time, and work to integrate math into other content areas through the day. Teachers might also share the blend of curricular components they are using to teach math and why.

The school opened this year having just completed a two-year renovation project. There is space to host teams of visitors. Teachers are ready and willing to share information on how they use ongoing assessment to guide "customization" of their curriculum.

The strong instructional leadership provided by the Principal over a ten year period and the collegial professional culture at the school might be difficult to duplicate at other schools, especially in the absence of common planning time during the school day as has been the case at Academy. However, the Panel agrees that these aspects of the school create positive conditions for hosting visiting teams.

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

Yes. Taken together, the elements that constitute the action research—groups of teachers looking at student work with a particular focus and purpose, careful breakdown of MCAS results and other school-wide student performance results to identify specific areas of need in student learning, and selecting strategies and pieces of research-based programs to address those needs—should bring positive results if implemented in any school.

The use of the action research model as a structure for a mentoring program also shows promise at the school or district level. The practical and concrete work involved in the research serves to acculturate new and veteran teachers to a model for continuous improvement of teaching and learning, and helps them internalize State learning standards as the benchmarks for that improvement, even as they develop a shared vocabulary for talking about their students' work.

Conclusion

The Panel found the Action Research project highlighted by the school to be a coherent approach to improving students' expository writing as the lever for overall student improvement that, with sufficient introduction and supporting materials, could be successfully adapted to the needs of various schools to good effect. The scope and level of that adaptation would of course depend upon the size and diversity of the student population and may prove most successful in similarly profiled schools.

APPENDIX A
Panel Members

Denise Delorey, Ph.D., Chair, MA Department of Education

Dr. Edward Sacco, Assistant Superintendent, Nashoba Regional School District

Jennifer Walsh, Teacher/Literacy Specialist K-5, Julia F. Callahan School, Lynn Public Schools

Stephen Gould, Principal, Lowell Elementary School, Watertown Public Schools

APPENDIX B
Candidate Compass School Panel Review Schedule

All activities take place at the school.

7:30—8:00 *a.m.* Panel meets 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—Chair
Student Focus Group	Parent Focus Group	Focus Group TBD	School Council Focus Group

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

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

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; including follow-up questions for the principal or other staff members.

1:00—2:00 *p.m.* Panelists meet with teachers in focus groups*

ATA-SPE Massachusetts Department of Education

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

2:00—2:15 *p.m.* Brief exit meeting with the principal to outline next steps (all panelists are present)

2:15—5 *p.m.* Panelists deliberate, document evidence 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 that could be shared by the school