

**Panel Report**  
**Candidate Compass School Review**  
**Ipswich High School**  
**Ipswich 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 Ipswich High School on May 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 review is provided in Appendix A. A detailed schedule of the Panel's activities is provided in Appendix B.

## **Ipswich High School Profile**

### **Enrollment**

Ipswich High School is one of four schools in Ipswich and it is the district's only high school. It serves students in grades 9 through 12. Between 1999 and 2002, enrollment at the school increased by 90 students, from 453 in 1999 to 540 in 2002. During this time period, White students represented 97 percent of the school's population. During this time seven percent of the students reported were low-income.

Attendance at Ipswich High School averaged 94 percent between 1998 and 2001. The average number of days absent per student was ten. Except for 2001 when the rate was four percent, there were no in-school suspensions between 1998 and 2000. Out-of-school suspensions fluctuated between 4 and 11.5. Dropout rates averaged two percent during that time.

### **Staffing**

At Ipswich High School there are 42 classroom teachers, 11 paraprofessionals, two administrators and two 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 19 have 15 or more years of experience.

## MCAS Overview

Students at Ipswich high School are tested in the MCAS in grade 10 in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. In Cycle II (2000-2001), the school was found to have made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in both ELA and mathematics.

### *Student Performance in English Language Arts*

In Cycle II, Ipswich High School received a performance rating of *High*, based on its proficiency index of 88.6 in ELA. The school's improvement was rated *Above Target* for its increase of 11.2 points over Cycle I (1999-2001). Participation rates in Cycle II were 97 percent in 2001 and 93 percent in 2002.

For Regular Education students' performance the trend over the last four years at Ipswich has been an increase in the proportions of Advanced and Proficient students and a decrease in the percentage of Failing students in ELA. In 1999, only six percent of Regular Education students at the school scored at the Advanced level of performance, 48 percent were Proficient, 35 percent at Needs Improvement, and 12 percent failed. In 2000, eight percent of students scored Advanced, 45 percent Proficient, 39 percent were in Needs Improvement and seven percent failed. In the first year of Cycle II, the percentage of students at Advanced doubled to 17 percent, while those at Proficient also increased to 52 percent. The proportion of students at the Needs Improvement fell to 28 percent, and three percent failed. In 2002, 32 percent of scores fell in the Advanced category, while 58 percent were Proficient, only 10 percent were in Needs Improvement and none failed the ELA test.

In Cycle I, the school's number of Special Education students was below the minimum sample size. In 2001, 17 percent of Special Education students tested were Proficient, 33 percent in Needs Improvement, and 50 percent failed. In 2002, seven percent of students in this subgroup were Advanced, 27 percent Proficient, 47 percent at the Needs Improvement level, and 20 percent failed.

### *Student Performance in Mathematics*

In Cycle II, the school received a performance rating of High in mathematics for its proficiency index of 84.0. Due to an 11.6-point increase from Cycle I, improvement was rated Above Target. Participation rates in Cycle II were 98 percent in 2001 and 95 percent in 2002.

Regular student performance at Ipswich in mathematics over the last two cycles has been characterized by increasing percentages of students scoring at the Advanced and Proficient levels of performance. In the first year of Cycle I, 15 percent of Regular Education students were Advanced, 25 percent Proficient, 34 percent at the Needs Improvement level, and 26 percent failed. In 2000, 34 percent of students scored at the Advanced level, 29 percent at Proficient, 24 percent at Needs Improvement and 13 percent failed. In 2001, 30 percent of scores fell in the Advanced category, 34 percent in Proficient, 33 percent of students were in Needs Improvement,

and three percent failed. In the second year of Cycle II, 46 percent of Regular Education students were Advanced, 31 percent Proficient, 20 percent scored at the Needs Improvement level, and three percent failed.

In Cycle I, the number of Special Education students was below the required minimum sample size. In 2001, five percent of special Education students were Proficient in mathematics, 47 percent were in Needs Improvement, and another 47 percent failed. In 2002, seven percent of students in this subgroup were Proficient, 53 percent of scores fell in the Needs Improvement category and 40 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?**

Yes. On a site specially designed and built for the purpose in 1999, Ipswich High School has implemented a block schedule and integrated information technology to create an inclusive school culture. With the extensive opportunities for peer learning this provides, MCAS scores have increased markedly over the last four years.

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

Ipswich High School uses the following strategies to maintain high achievement:

In a building specially designed for student centered learning with pentagonal classrooms and easily accessible group meeting bays ("kivas") fully integrated information technology has been systematically introduced over the last eight years to support peer learning. This includes wireless stations and workbook computers in a fully networked media center and library, a minimum of five computers in every classroom and state of the art hardware and software for all curriculum areas including music and technology. All teachers are equipped with laptops that they use extensively for planning, assessment and professional communication. These initiatives have impacted positively on the professional culture and students' aspirations to achieve at the highest levels. For example, special education program support is accessed by teachers using their networked computers. Students regularly make presentations using Microsoft Power Point using drop-down screens available in each kiva. In technology classes students learn the very latest 3-D CAD software alongside their teacher. This whole scale incorporation of technology in learning increases the quality of both instruction and learning and is impacting positively on raising student achievement.

Professional development is closely linked to the school's underlying philosophy of student centered, technology supported learning. For example: all teachers new to the school are assigned a mentor within their subject area; classroom visits are arranged between teachers to enable professional development and a summer academy keeps teachers up to date with technology developments. The emphasis on site based professional development contributes to high professional morale as well as continuing learning (one teacher commented "you never stop learning here"); this 'learning focused' culture to which the vast majority, if not all the faculty subscribe impacts very favorably on raising student achievement.

There is an emphasis throughout the system on building leaders. This is particularly the case for teachers in the area of curriculum development. Administrators from the middle and high school grade levels take responsibility to see that development groups within each curriculum area meet regularly, but these are chaired by faculty members. At the end of the school year all teachers are paid a \$100 daily stipend to work for 3 - 5 days in faculty groups to review curriculum and instruction as the result of item analysis of MCAS results and other data. This is said to be a critical factor in the school's success in sustaining a curriculum closely aligned to state frameworks and meeting student needs.

Students also have extensive opportunities to develop leadership skills through a timetable of over fifteen extracurricular programs that include a music program in which nearly 50% of the school population participates, math and science leagues, a theatre company and a very wide range of sporting activities and cultural exchange visits. Most importantly the school places heavy emphasis on school to work transition programs. The college entry figure for the school has increased from 75% to 85% over the last three years.

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

Seven years ago the school council, which remains the driving force for strategic change, decided to consider the adoption of block scheduling. Prior to its introduction building administrators and faculty members visited block scheduled sites in Massachusetts and other states. Experts came to the school to discuss the ramifications of block scheduling and teachers were required to read about instructional objectives within a blocked schedule both from a theoretical stance and by reference to case studies. Block scheduling was successfully introduced in 1998 and since then teachers have continued to receive training in the appropriate allocation of time within blocks, so that faculty, parents and students fully support the system. The review team received no negative comments, for instance, about lack of sufficient pace or difficulty sustaining interest within the blocks.

The School Improvement Plan has typically identified a small number of goals each year and the focus has been to move the school closer to the overall aim of a fully integrated student centered learning environment, fully supported by teachers, parents and students. Maintaining confidence in change strategies has been a critical balance between maintaining resolve and strong communications. Key to this has been a willingness to change directions based on the scientific analysis of data and stakeholder response. For example, despite initial enthusiasm from the

faculty, an integrated science program was abandoned after two years of unfavorable results and a lack of student enthusiasm for the program.

Decision making at Ipswich High School is driven by professional dialogue at subject committee level. Such a culture ensures the faculty is fully and intrinsically involved in change initiatives.

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

Four reasons were given as to why the student centered/integrated technology block schedule can be successfully introduced in similar schools. Of prime importance to the success of the initiative is the school's focus on creating a learning culture that incorporates teachers and parents as well as students. Secondly, it is low cost (total school spending is approx. \$5,000 per student a year). Thirdly it has depended for its success on regular and systematic professional development and, finally, decisions have been driven by analysis of student needs within subject committees chaired by faculty. Each of these elements necessary to make such an approach successful is within the reach of most similar schools and districts.

Ipswich High School has enjoyed high staff stability and increasing student success (as measured by increasing college entry and MCAS achievement and decreasing suspension and drop out rates). The school administrators link this success squarely with the creation of a learning culture that permeates all aspects of their work. They believe this can be replicated and that all teachers can espouse such a culture, even if this requires changing their attitude and philosophy, so long as this 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 at Ipswich High School for the school to serve as a model of effective practices and successful improvement initiatives. Ipswich High School is pleased with the success of their innovative strategies that have resulted in increasingly high student performance. They are also aware of special features (for example, the very fine site and the district's thoughtful organization of its schooling) that may not be so easy to replicate everywhere. They do not presume to have answers for a multi-variety of high school settings. It would therefore seem important for interested schools to discuss the purpose and value of any potential visit before committing to such a visit.

**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?**

All members of Ipswich High School agree that the introduction of student-centered classrooms with carefully planned block scheduling and the resourceful use of technology have significantly improved student achievement. The leadership articulate this clearly through their leadership

report and in the student-parent handbook, which positively reinforces from the outset the active role students are expected to play in their own learning.

**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 at curriculum development level—forces teachers and administrators to make the connection between planned initiatives, changed instructional objectives and student learning goals. Teachers refer positively to the block schedule and are reflective in articulating how they teach differently in longer lesson periods, requiring active learning on the part of students. Students refer positively to the support they receive and to the accessibility of learning technology. Parents are enthusiastic about the block scheduling, and in particular about the way in which the school communicates curriculum and systemic changes and involves them in these processes.

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

The effective use of small group learning facilitated by the block schedule and utilizing cutting edge IT was in evidence in all areas of the school, in areas as diverse as English Literature and Engineering technology. Financially the school has benefited historically from technology grants and a strong community commitment to realizing the vision.

Investment in the "learning culture" has paid off not only in student success but also in a calm and orderly building where there is a high degree of mutual respect. Efforts are made to include students with special educational needs or learning disabilities (such as a severely autistic boy who appeared to be fully integrated) and the small number of ethnic minority students (3%). For instance, some trouble was taken last year to ensure the success of two young Afghanistan nationals who joined the school community.

**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?**

Ipswich High School staff and administration communicate well orally about their initiatives, and written presentations - such as a Power Point (Microsoft ©) presentation or a hard copy explanatory package would be well within their reach. 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 and the instructional methods they have developed, particularly those utilizing small groups and technology. Communication about what has been achieved is coherent and consistent amongst the various stakeholders, including the students

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

Yes, within the guidelines set for selection. Ipswich High School has implemented a block schedule and integrated information technology to create an inclusive school culture. With the extensive opportunities for peer learning thus provided, MCAS scores have increased markedly 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 the new student-centered culture and they have the capacity to do so.

### **CONCLUSION**

The success of this school and the sound basis for improving achievement through the initiatives identified as significant goes without question. However, much that is good happens at the Ipswich High School because of a faculty carefully selected by competitive interview. Teachers demonstrate a marked degree of professional respect for each other, for the administration and for the wider school community including the students. It seems important to state that only schools with a cohesive and committed faculty are likely to be successful in adopting the Ipswich culture and to reinforce that it should serve as a model only those high schools that are demographically similar. The majority of Ipswich High School students come from families who are very supportive of education. The prevailing culture of the school is Caucasian, and the development of a multi-cultural response to learning within the curriculum is limited. Some school policies noted would not be appropriate in settings where the social and moral enrichment of the students is more exclusively the task of the school. (For example the policy of withholding students from extra curricular activities as a sanction against tardiness). With these provisos the initiatives developed at Ipswich High School could serve as useful models to other similar schools in the Commonwealth.

### **APPENDIX A Panel Members**

**Peter Davies**, Chair, Consultant, Class Measures

**June Saba**, Assessment/Administrative Intern, Brockton Public Schools

**Les Bernal**, PALMS, Northeast Region

**Pat DiPillo**, Teacher, Acton-Boxborough High School

### **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 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
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

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\*

	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, if designated.