

**Panel Report
Candidate Compass School Review
Webster Elementary School
Everett 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 Webster Elementary School on April 16, 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.

Webster Elementary School Profile

Enrollment

Webster Elementary School is one of eight schools in Everett and seven elementary schools in the district. Between 1999 and 2002, enrollment at the school averaged 370 students. It should be noted that in 2001 student enrollment soared to 462, compared to 266 in 2000. In terms of student demographics, White students accounted for 80 percent of the school's total student population, while Asian, Black, and Hispanic students accounted for less than 10 percent each.

Between 1999 and 2002, twenty percent of the Webster School's student body were non-native English speakers, while five percent were Limited English Proficient. Fifty percent students at the school, during that time, were low-income. As a result, there is a school-wide Title I program in place.

Attendance at the Webster School between 1998 and 2001 averaged 95 percent, with students absent nine days on average. Retentions during this period averaged two percent. There were no in-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspensions averaged less than one percent for those four years. No students were excluded during this period.

Staffing

At the Webster School, there are 23 classroom teachers, 10 specialist teachers, one administrator and one guidance counselor. All teachers at this school are licensed in the subjects they teach. Nineteen teachers have more than 15 years of experience, while eight have been teachers for fewer than five years

MCAS Overview

Students at the Webster School are tested in the MCAS in grade 3 in English language arts (ELA) and in grade 4 in 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, the Webster School received a performance rating of *Very High* in ELA, based on its proficiency index of 92.3. For its 17.3-point improvement over Cycle I (1999-2000), the school received an improvement rating of *Above Target*. Student participation rates in Cycle II were 97 percent in 2001 and 92 percent in 2002 in ELA.

The ELA test in grade 3 was first administered in Cycle II. In the first year of Cycle II, 80 percent of Regular Education students at the Webster School scored Proficient, while 20 percent scored at the Needs Improvement level. In 2002, 83 percent of students in this group were Proficient with 17 in Needs Improvement.

In Cycle II, the Webster School saw greater proportions of its Regular Education students in grade 4 performing at the Proficient level of performance in ELA. In 1999, two percent of Regular Education students at the school scored in the Advanced category, 47 percent in Proficient, 49 percent in Needs Improvement, and two percent in Warning. In 2000, 39 percent of were found Proficient, 52 percent were in Needs Improvement, while 10 percent scored at Warning. In the first year of Cycle II, seven percent of the school's Regular Education student population was Advanced. The percentage of students performing at the Proficient level rose to 75 percent, while those at the Needs Improvement level fell to just 18 percent. In 2002, eight percent of students were Advanced, 76 percent Proficient, and 16 percent performed at the Needs Improvement level.

Student Performance in Mathematics

In mathematics the Webster School received a performance rating of *Moderate* in Cycle II for its proficiency index of 79.7. Its 12.1-point improvement over Cycle I was rated *Above Target*. Student participation rates in mathematics in Cycle II were 97 percent in both years.

At the grade 4 level, the performance of Regular Education students in mathematics in Cycle II was characterized by a movement of students out of the Needs Improvement category and into Proficient. In 1999, four percent of Regular Education students scored in the Advanced category, 24 percent in Proficient, 62 percent in Needs Improvement, and nine percent in Warning. In the second year of Cycle I, 22 percent of students were Proficient, 66 percent in Needs Improvement, and 13 percent performed at the Warning level. In 2001, seven percent of all Regular Education students at the Webster School were Advanced, 33 percent Proficient, 57 percent scored at the Needs Improvement level while three percent were in Warning. In 2002, the percentage of students scoring at the Advanced level rose to 17 percent, as did those in Proficient to 45 percent. The proportion of students in Needs Improvement fell to 30 percent with eight percent of scores falling in the Warning category.

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. The Webster School community has established a clear focus on standards-based teaching and learning through the implementation of effective improvement initiatives that could be replicated in other schools with a similar profile. At the heart of all school improvement efforts is a strong commitment, school and district-wide, to make the Learning Standards set forth in the *Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks* accessible to all students.

Primary initiatives that have contributed to the success of the Webster Elementary School include: high expectations for all children; analysis of MCAS results and feedback from all stakeholders to evaluate instruction and school practices; alignment of literacy programs and core subject curricula with the Frameworks; professional development in literacy and pedagogy for all classroom teachers and administrators; a rigorous, clinical approach to teacher evaluation; clear and open lines of communication between students, teachers, parents and administration; and a school climate that embodies the core values of care, collaboration and community.

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

Webster staff and administration credit key district initiatives, a number of embedded school practices and systems of communication as well as a caring, collaborative school culture for the continued academic success of students at the Webster Elementary School. During interviews, teachers, parents, school and district administrators repeatedly cited the commitment of the Everett Public Schools “to raise the bar for all children” as the foundation for all school improvement planning. Under the leadership of the Superintendent, the district has worked to

align all curricular and instructional programs K-12 to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

It was evident to the Panel that at the Webster School “raising the bar” was not merely a matter of “covering” content that would be on MCAS tests. Instead, “high expectations for all children” were articulated as a commitment to structure the curricular scope and sequence and instruction in core subjects to reflect the basic facts and key concepts, the habits of mind and methods of inquiry of the major academic disciplines as embodied in the Framework Strands. The Webster School Improvement Plan contains nine goal areas. Four of the goals contain Action Plans to promote academic rigor, individualized instruction and alignment with the Frameworks in English Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies and Science. A most tangible indicator of the commitment to make state Learning Standards accessible to every child is that the Webster School employs an inclusionary model school-wide. As the Principal stated in the School Leadership Report, Special Education students and ESL students receive support services primarily within the school’s regular education classrooms.

Building on the commitment to high expectations and standards-based teaching and learning, the most frequently mentioned school improvement initiatives are: 1) the Webster MCAS Action Plan; 2) an instructional focus on literacy; 3) a rigorous approach to instructional planning and teacher evaluation; and 4) a school climate which fosters adherence to the core values of care, collaboration and community. These initiatives are uniformly well planned and documented in detail. Appropriate and on-going professional development at the school and district levels has supported the effective implementation of improvement initiatives.

Webster MCAS Action Plan: As defined by the Principal and corroborated in faculty focus groups and interviews with individual teachers, Webster’s MCAS Action Plan is “a yearly blueprint to analyze MCAS test results, designate strengths and weaknesses, and incorporate strategies into the classroom to improve student performance.” The MCAS Action Team is comprised of classroom teachers who are organized into grade level teams in grades 3-6. All staff, from kindergarten through the seventh grade, receive yearly item analyses of MCAS results sorted by question type, Learning Standards and Strands. The MCAS Action Plan also includes a summary of findings listing recommendations regarding instructional strategies derived from error analysis of student responses, specific topics to add or review within the curricular scope and sequence, and suggested classroom activities and resources.

The MCAS Action Plan has spawned a number of MCAS related activities that have come to be recognized by students, parents, and staff as integral elements of Webster School practice and culture. MCAS Fridays were introduced to focus instruction on test-taking skills, MCAS vocabulary, and open-ended response questions. The use of rubrics to evaluate long compositions in each subject area and basic computational skills in math are also stressed in this school-wide effort throughout grades K-7. On Fridays, during the months of January through May, students in grades 3-6 receive MCAS Weekly Homework Assignments. Every teacher at Webster is provided binders with prior test items for all previous MCAS test administrations. Grade level teams select sample test items, including open-ended questions, which correspond to

designated areas of weakness for Webster students in ELA, math and science. Students return their completed assignments, with their parents signatures attached, to their teachers on Mondays for review in class. The Webster School has also implemented an MCAS After-School Program to provide extended learning time and remedial support for “at-risk” students primarily in mathematics through working on homework and enrichment activities in computer and art.

Focus on Literacy: Through the Massachusetts Reading Excellence Grant program, all Everett teachers were provided professional development to supplement staff skills with training in the balanced literacy program adopted by the district. The professional development courses centered on the Rigby model and practices. Elements of the balanced literacy program, cited in focus groups and evident in classroom observations, include an emphasis on an integrated, interactive approach to reading, writing and language arts, a concentration on phonemic awareness in the primary grades, guided reading and flexible grouping. Literacy Walks are a school and district practice established to provide teachers with the opportunity to visit other classrooms in order to view and share literacy practices. Teachers may opt to visit classrooms within their own school or other schools within the district; the literacy walks may be at the same or at different grade levels. Title I personnel at Webster and district Title I administrators echoed the Principal’s perspective that the Literacy Walks have served to ensure that sound, balanced literacy practices are emulated in every building and in every classroom.

“Principles of Effective Teaching”: A second major district professional development initiative that has been an integral factor in bolstering the effectiveness of school improvement practices at the Webster School has been the district’s long-term commitment to train all teachers and administrators in Research for Better Teaching (RBT). The rationale for extensive training in RBT, clearly articulated in interviews with school and district administration, was to provide a common language for instructional planning and instructional supervision. The expected outcomes of this common language based on the RBT training and The Skillful Teacher are clearly in evidence within the Webster School environment in the judgement of Panel members. Faculty members make frequent reference to well-defined RBT strategies and practices to inform their classroom instruction and to meet individual and group needs. This common terminology and philosophy is employed in professional collaboration in various settings, particularly in grade level meetings, to diagnose student’s specific learning gaps and areas of strength. The Principal reported, in written documentation and in interviews with the Panel, that RBT has strengthened his own skill set to provide instructional leadership and supervision.

The teacher evaluation process itself adheres to the reflective and analytical model espoused by Research for Better Teaching. The teacher evaluation process utilizes a clinical approach in that classroom observations are required to include pre- and post-conferencing between the evaluator/principal and the teacher. Most importantly, the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendents informed members of the Panel that the teacher evaluation instrument within the Everett Public Schools was revised to incorporate and reflect both Research for Better Teaching practices and the seven *Standards* that comprise the “*Principles and Descriptors for Effective Teaching*” promulgated by the Massachusetts Department of Education.

School Climate: Supplementing the emphasis on the Framework Learning Standards and state Standards for Effective Teaching are systems of communication, formal and informal, as well as clearly articulated core values which define an inclusive, collegial and nurturing school climate.

The Webster School Mission Statement includes the following “Principles:”

- To accommodate the varying learning styles and rates of all children;
- To respect cultural differences within the student population;
- To maintain high levels of expectations.

The manner in which the Webster School Principal synthesizes and implements these educational Principles is to consistently stress that the care and well being of every child and the establishment of a safe, nurturing school climate must be a whole school effort.

In terms that were strikingly similar to the Principal’s contention that such an effort was “vital to education,” the school’s dedicated faculty stressed the importance of a caring school climate in both a collective and individual sense. In faculty focus groups and individual teacher interviews, they articulated the belief that in order for a student to reach their full academic potential, every child must feel that the adults within the schoolhouse know and care for them. Faculty views also reflect the school leader’s approach to school success by stressing the centrality of mechanisms whereby teachers, parents, and students could share their opinions in a respectful, trusting manner, to have their viewpoints and professional input “carefully” considered and encouraged, for decision-making to be shared, and for communication to be on-going between all stakeholders within the school community.

The Webster School Principal exemplified the school’s aforementioned Mission Statement and demonstrated his genuine respect and commitment to the community of Everett in his description of the school’s demographics. His words in the School Leadership Report were that, “A rich diversity of cultures in our student population has helped to infuse vitality into our building.” A strong home-school connection centering on the reporting of student progress, MCAS testing schedules and results, and school activities is also in evidence at the Webster School. Parents are an integral part of the School Council and the formulation of the School Improvement Plan.

The faculty of the Webster School is regarded and regards itself as a community of learners. Professional development activities include a strong teachers-training-teachers component, and, as has been previously indicated, the district has committed to supporting and extending the skill set of all faculty members through research-based professional development themes. Finally, within the structure of the school day at the Webster School there are a number of important job-embedded professional development opportunities for teachers to brainstorm and share practices. These practices and opportunities are central aspects of a culture of school improvement that stresses professional collegiality and collaboration.

In addition to the work of the MCAS Action Teams and the Literacy Walks, the collegial or collaborative endeavors most often identified by Webster staff included: common grade level planning time, communication that guidance coordinates between teachers, parents and administration, established protocols for the Teacher Assistance Team, and the assignment of

building specialists, i.e. art, music, computer, and physical education teachers to classrooms to provide MCAS support in designated blocks of time.

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

In focus groups with the Panel, faculty and parents, school and district administrators used common terms to describe the process of implementing, evaluating and sustaining planned improvement initiatives at the Webster Elementary School. The “inter-connectedness” of numerous programs and practices as well as the strong interface between school and district planning surfaced as the primary themes consistently emphasized for the successful implementation of school improvement efforts at Webster.

The exact starting point of improvement efforts, acknowledged throughout the on-site visit, was the examination of results on the first round of MCAS assessments. In 1998, the Webster School was the lowest performing elementary school within the district. The Principal immediately inaugurated a process of examining MCAS results to develop a shared understanding – school-wide – of students’ strengths and weaknesses in the skills and knowledge defined in the Curriculum Frameworks.

For the first two years, the MCAS Action Plan consisted of item analyses by question type and by Learning Standard or Strands. To establish high standards for student performance on MCAS, state averages were used as benchmarks. Areas of weakness were identified when student performance fell under the state average on a specific test item. When the performance of Webster students was above the state average on a test item, the skill or content area was designated as a strength. For the last two years, the MCAS Action Plans have been expanded to include the aforementioned summaries regarding recommendations for instructional strategies, curricular coverage, assessment practices, and available resources.

The MCAS Action Teams consist of classroom teachers, organized into grade level committees who then are divided into groups that focus on either English Language Arts or mathematics. As indicated previously, the process involves cross-referencing each MCAS test item to the Learning Standards with an accompanying description of the skills, basic facts and key concepts underlying each question. Currently, this cross-referencing of MCAS results with Learning Standards includes a multiple year review of MCAS tests, a comparison to the results of IOWA basic skills testing, and an examination of students’ long compositions and scoring guides. The Principal reported that the committee work this year was accomplished by utilizing twenty-five hours of building based professional development time.

The committee’s findings on strengths and weaknesses in English Language Arts, for example, revealed that the use of correct sentence structure has been a strength since 1999. The initially identified areas of weakness focused on the use of grammar mechanics, vocabulary, and topic development. These areas have shown documented improvement in the last three years. Student writing now reflects greater control of vocabulary and improved topic development. In

mathematics, the item analyses have stressed the need to reinforce basic math facts and skills in probability and statistics.

The Webster MCAS Action Plans are shared with every member of the Webster School faculty. IOWA Tests of basic skills for grades 2, 3, 4, 5 and MCAS tests for grades 4-6 are primary sources for assessment. Prior to the start of each school year, the Principal prepares rank-ordered reports of IOWA tests for teachers to utilize to identify “at-risk” students and to create flexible learning groups. Teacher’s MCAS binders include individual student test results, Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for Special Education students and Individual Student Success Plans (ISSPs) for students enrolled in the MCAS Support Program. The dissemination of student testing results reinforces the notion that MCAS and the advancement of student achievement is a whole school effort and collective responsibility. Reviewing the scores of students within their classes during the previous and current year provides teachers with a sound data base and comprehensive learning profiles to review aspects of their own instruction and meet individual student learning needs

General patterns in MCAS test data for the student population as a whole and individual student results are utilized throughout the school environment. As a result of the data analysis, the MCAS after-school support program focuses primarily on mathematics. Students who have scored within the Warning Performance Level as well as students who have been identified as “at risk” are recommended for placement in the program. Participation is voluntary, yet a strong parent outreach effort describing the program’s initiatives has been coordinated by the administration with assistance from the guidance department. The Individual Student Success Plans for students within the program are derived from an analysis of their individual test reports and are a joint effort of classroom teachers, support staff, and guidance. Testing results are also utilized within the Teacher Assistance Team, the entity within the Webster School that in accordance with Special Education guidelines identifies students who may need accommodations or individualized learning plans to meet the requirements of the curriculum.

The very nature of the school day at Webster reflects the school’s prioritized focus on MCAS and the Frameworks. The Principal has effectively used creative scheduling and personnel to incorporate MCAS support and MCAS preparation into the structure of the school schedule. The first integral element of the Webster school schedule is grade level common planning time. Additionally, MCAS support is provided in all Webster classrooms beginning in kindergarten. As part of their daily schedule, art, music and physical education teachers are assigned to go into regular classrooms to provide MCAS remedial help and to assist in small group instruction for 45-minute blocks of time. In interviews with Panel members, the Principal stressed the importance of this academic component in the specialist’s schedules. He stated it was “paramount” that every teacher in every subject area and specialty is viewed and, in turn, see themselves as responsible for contributing to student success. In addition to extending ownership of MCAS throughout the faculty, the daily support from specialists serves to maintain the level of support provided by Title I staff, which has been reduced because of budget cuts from ten to two positions during the current academic year.

The dedication of district professional development time and resources has provided a solid underpinning for sustaining Webster's improvement efforts. The instructional focus on literacy began in 2000 with the district's decision to participate in the READ Excellence Grant program. The Title I Director set forth the underlying rationale for the balanced literacy program and accompanying training in Rigby practices in the initial 1999 grant application for the Webster School. The district mandated approach to reading instruction is "governed initially by the recognition that all Everett schools serve large numbers of student from low-income populations, there is accordingly a strong curricular focus on developing a critical basic knowledge related to literacy."

Initially, Title I personnel and all administrators were trained in Rigby practices; training was then extended to selected staff members. In order to make effective use of limited financial resources and concomitantly build in-house capacity to sustain balanced literacy at all grade levels, the Title I Director made the strategic decision to adopt a Teacher-Training-Teachers Model to extend Rigby training and practices. All classroom teachers receive in-service training from Title I personnel or staff members within their school. The Rigby program also encompasses a strong parental component. The district Read Coordinator offered parents a five-week Rigby course to reinforce the home-school connection.

The district's involvement in Research for Better Teaching dates back to 1991. Initially, all district administrators and principals were trained in RBT. Then, all teachers were required to complete a rigorous three-course RBT sequence, supported through district funds. As indicated previously, instructional planning and supervision are grounded in the techniques and terminology of *The Skillful Teacher*. In 1996, the district's teacher evaluation instrument was revised to incorporate RBT's narrative, analytical approach and the DOE Standards of Effective Teaching. Principals are held accountable for the completion and substance of teacher evaluations. The Superintendent and Assistant Superintendents stressed that they "read every teacher evaluation." Upon review by district administrators, feedback regarding the comprehensive nature of the principals' summaries is provided, and on occasion, the evaluations are returned to be revised if the narratives are found lacking in detail.

Finally, the school's planning efforts are guided by the School Improvement Plan, which is impressive in its detail and clarity. The SIP is comprised of nine goal areas; most notably a goal area for each academic subject as well as a goal dedicated to school climate. The accompanying Action Plans set forth goals and objectives that are measurable, timelines and identification of responsible parties. The SIP also summarizes the data analysis of student assessment results comprised in the MCAS Action Plans to establish a connection between school efforts and their effect on student performance. The document also contains a comprehensive Needs Assessment based on surveys of students, teachers and parents. The Webster School Council teacher and parent representatives partake in a mid-year and end of year review of the SIP. In addition to this internal monitoring of the implementation and effectiveness of school planning efforts, the School Improvement Plan undergoes thorough review and evaluation at the district level. The Webster School Council is required to present updates three times a year on the SIP to the Everett School Committee.

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

Webster School's leadership, teachers, and parents believe, and the Panel agrees, that this standards-based approach to teaching and learning and inclusive school climate can be replicated successfully in other schools. First, the strategies of working with MCAS and curricular alignment could be duplicated in other schools. Teachers and the Principal are enthusiastic about sharing their resulting plans, scheduling strategies, classroom activities, and homework tools with other educators. Furthermore, the experience of the Webster School, in their view, serves as a model of effective implementation and sustaining of research based programs, such as the balanced literacy program and Research for Better Teaching. Finally, faculty, parents, district staff and administrators assert that the success of Webster School's planning for higher student achievement exemplifies the critical nature of the Principal's leadership. The Webster Principal is credited with consistently fostering the inclusive, collaborative and professional climate that exists within the school, maintaining open communication with faculty and parents, and coordinating the efforts, energy and enthusiasm of the school community to promote the academic and social potential of each child.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence that another school can replicate the practices and school climate at Webster lies within this very schoolhouse. In 2001, the student population of the Webster School, in effect, doubled due to the assignment of students from another elementary school to the Webster as part of a district building project. For the first time, Webster began to serve students in the 7th grade. Next year, the students who were originally from both elementary schools will be housed in a new building with a K through 8 grade configuration. The transition of students and faculty to the Webster School environment was described as "seamless." Teachers, parents and students were welcomed within the nurturing school climate and participated in established practices within the newly expanded school community.

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 Webster Elementary School definitely demonstrates the willingness and capacity to serve as a model of effective practices and successful improvement initiatives. Leadership at the school and district levels is strong and has clearly articulated a shared belief in high expectations for all children. Faculty members exhibit confidence in their students' ability to succeed and are dedicated to working collaboratively to meet individual student needs. Administration and staff at the school and district levels similarly cite the linkage of systemic, strategic planning to state Standards for both teaching and learning as a critical factor in achieving the sustained advances in student performance evident at the Webster School.

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?

Leadership and staff have a shared understanding and use a common language to describe the initiatives that have led to improvements in teaching and learning. Common themes, which were emphasized in individual interviews and focus groups with school and district administrators, faculty and parents, centered on high expectations for all children, accountability and responsibility, and the strong leadership of the building Principal.

The school review revealed the tremendous impact of a shared allegiance to high expectations. While the language of “Excellence” and “High Standards” are present in other school and district mission statements, parents and teachers credited the Superintendent and Principal for making a collective vision of excellence a reality. One teacher gave eloquent testimony to Everett’s mission to “raise the bar” for all children. “One of the most significant barriers that we as a school system have overcome is the perception that, because we are a poor urban system, we could only expect to achieve limited academic success with our students. Despite this perception by some, we continue to strive for and attain academic success for all our students.”

The underlying philosophy at the Webster School is that all the staff takes ownership for instruction for all students and are responsible for school improvement efforts. This collective responsibility was repeatedly described to Panel members as “an across the board” effort “year-round” to involve “all grades” and “all disciplines” in MCAS. Strong systems of accountability established throughout the school and system regarding teacher evaluation, expectations for classroom instruction, and the preparation of MCAS related material were cited for insuring that improvement initiatives were effectively implemented and sustained.

A common language of accountability was also present when teachers, parents, and leadership explained their own roles. The district recognized its responsibility to provide staff and administration targeted professional development to improve instruction and meet student needs. The Superintendent and Assistant Superintendents explained that building principals are held accountable for teacher evaluations, are expected to know the Curriculum Frameworks and be well versed in the theoretical foundations of adopted programs. Teachers acknowledged their responsibility, and the Principal’s supervisory role, in ensuring that *The Skillful Teacher* and literacy practices are incorporated into their instructional repertoire. Parents talked about their teachers’ commitment “to make MCAS scores important” and the need to reinforce this at home. Parents recognized the diagnostic purposes of the MCAS weekend homework assignments, are careful to remind their children to complete their assignments, and partake in literacy events at school to reinforce reading at home.

Throughout the on-site visit, the Webster School community and district personnel attributed the success of improvement initiatives to the leadership skills of the building Principal. The words most often used to describe the Webster Principal were that he was “the driving force” behind the school’s transformation and was a “role model” for students and teachers. The Title I Director cited the Principal’s “persistence in the mission of literacy” and credited him with “nurturing the collegiality” within the building. The Superintendent pointed to the Principal’s success in establishing a caring school climate, and one that, most importantly, promoted “pride and professionalism at the elementary level.” Teachers spoke about how the Principal focused

classroom instruction on the Frameworks and led them in the process of cross-referencing MCAS results with the Learning Standards.

In many ways, the parents and staff consider the Principal to be “unique” in his tireless child advocacy, high expectations for students and teachers to excel, and ability “to make every person feel important and feel their views are heard.” Yet, it was abundantly evident to Panel members that faculty and students model themselves after the Principal and embrace the core values he has worked to establish. One teacher reported, “The Principal has such faith in both the student body and the faculty, that no one wants to let him down. As a result, there is a high level of commitment on the part of each faculty member to help each student in the building. The culture of the building is supportive and non-competitive.”

It is important to note that the Title I Director, the Superintendent and the Principal believe that many aspects of school leadership at the Webster School could be replicated within other school environments. Both the Superintendent and the Principal stressed the importance of visibility and visiting classrooms on a daily basis. Individual teacher interviews and faculty focus groups corroborated that the Principal has been successful in his stated approach to “daily dialog concerning the education and well-being of each student in the school.” The Principal’s “open-door policy” cited by parents and faculty members reflects a commitment to formal and informal systems of communication to involve all stakeholders in school improvement and decision-making.

B. How effectively do leadership and staff articulate the connections between specific changes and improvement initiatives they have implemented, and the improvements made in teaching and learning?

School leadership and faculty at the Webster Elementary School clearly articulate connections between established systems and practices and improvements in teaching and learning. The faculty and Principal point to the data analysis and correlation of student results to the Learning Standards as the foundation for meeting individual student needs and student performance overall. This assessment driven instruction has led to changes in assessment practices within the school. Expressed goals in the Webster School Improvement Plan are “to provide multi-faceted” assessments in all classrooms and “to foster pupil self-assessment through rubrics, portfolios, journals and research projects across the curriculum.” Teachers utilize quarterly assessments, standardized tests and authentic assessments to monitor flexible grouping and student progress.

The importance of extensive district-wide professional development and vehicles within the school environment that provide job embedded professional development were repeatedly cited for improving instructional practice. The training in the literacy program and Research for Better Teaching has provided a common philosophy and expanded repertoire for teachers to supplement their skill set. Teachers made particular reference to the Teacher Assistance Team, common planning time, and the Literacy Walks as important opportunities to collaborate and

brainstorm with colleagues and to share practices. One teacher explained, “Before the Rigby training and the Literacy Walks, teachers shut their doors and did their own thing. Now, we are able to see what the program promotes. We can see what a great literate environment looks like and that has helped me to develop my own centers.” A veteran teacher at the Webster emphasized that the sharing of ideas through the Literacy Walks has helped “not only the struggling readers but experienced professionals to tap the wonderful world of literature in a myriad of ways.”

The values, goals and practices which structure the school climate at the Webster School are described as creating a “true” community of learners, for both students and adults. When asked to elaborate on specific initiatives that exemplified the school’s mission statement, teachers and leadership spoke knowledgeably and with genuine dedication about school traditions that reinforce cultural diversity, celebrate student academic achievement, and that bring students and teachers across grade levels together. The opening exercises and extended homeroom every day, awards for Readers and Writers of the Month, the Math Wizzard Bulletin Board, and the Reading-Buddies program were school practices most often emphasized to the Panel. As the Principal explained, the Math Bulletin board outside his office highlights individual student efforts on their proficiency of basic math facts. Students who have completed math computations, prepared by grade level teachers, within a five, four, or three-minute time frame, have their name placed in a star on Math Wizzard Board. The Reading Buddies Program pairs students across grade levels to further promote a shared love of reading. At the end of the school year, the school publishes a book presenting writing and illustrations of the paired student authors.

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

The staff and leadership at the Webster School provide an interesting, challenging educational experience for their students as a direct result of a common vision and belief in high expectations and have collectively directed their efforts toward the unifying goal of a standards-based approach to teaching and learning.

Significant and substantial evidence of a school wide investment in the continued improvement of student performance can be obtained through a review of important written documents and surveys. The Instructional Staff Survey conducted by the Department of Education revealed an extraordinary level of support, in effect near unanimity, for school leadership and improvement initiatives. Ninety-three percent of teacher respondents “strongly agreed” with the survey items that asked whether the school’s principal “provides effective leadership to guide and support staff efforts to improve the academic performance of students” and whether the school has “a well defined plan for reaching student performance goals.” Ninety-seven percent of the faculty gave high ratings to professional development, curriculum guidance, assessment and access to student information.

The Webster School Improvement Plan includes a comprehensive Needs Assessment Summary based on surveys of parents, teachers and students. The survey items are also included within the SIP. The school's Needs Assessment provides valuable indicators – both quantitative and qualitative – of school wide support for improvement planning efforts. The categorization of survey items in areas devoted to Teacher-Student Relationships, Student-Peer Relationships, and Parent Community Relationships exemplifies the school's inclusive climate. The survey focus on Student Academic Orientation and Behavioral Values is reflective of the school's Mission Statement. The narrative summary compiled from the surveys revealed that teachers are viewed as supporting and respecting students as well as explaining work carefully and challenging them to think creatively. The school's administration is seen as “setting a good example by working hard, promoting high standards, communicating effectively, and being responsive to complaints and opinions.” It was emphasized that students have a “sense of belonging to the school” and feel that it “provides a supportive and respectful climate” with “clear expectations for student learning and behavior.”

Parent feedback is an additional source for assessing support for improvement initiatives. In focus groups with parents and the School Council, it was evident that the school has made it a priority to involve parents in school planning and, importantly, to seek parental input regarding the progress of their children. The TAT protocol includes a component for parent feedback. Promotion and retention decisions must appear before the parent and teacher TAT meetings. Parental input is valued as well in student placement decisions. One parent spoke with reverence about his sixth grade teacher at the Webster and is looking forward to his daughter's being able to experience the same exciting sixth grade classroom. Parents in both focus groups made reference to the timely and frequent school newsletters, published in multiple languages, as providing important information regarding MCAS and school activities.

Classroom observations provided clear evidence of established instructional programs and practices within classroom learning environments. Key aspects of the literacy program and RBT strategies were utilized with great facility, expertise and enthusiasm. Guided Reading activities, Read-Alouds and interactive writing activities were modeled consistently. In classrooms across all grade levels, Panel members observed literacy centers as well as projects, which emphasized the school's focus on main concepts and methods of inquiry in Social Studies and Science.

Classroom lessons observed, without exception, were well planned, well structured and well implemented. Teachers demonstrated clarity in communicating lesson objectives and expectations and equal clarity in communicating their faith in students' ability to achieve. The lessons were varied in their activities, containing a thoughtful balance of whole class discussion, cooperative pairings and small groups, and individual seatwork. Teachers skillfully handled transitions without loss of learning time, student interest or participation. The use of highly skilled questioning techniques bolstered student learning. Teacher questions reinforced a review of basic facts and allowed for open-ended responses from students. Often teachers were seen to vary their approach and response to each individual student. Throughout the classroom observations, teachers maintained a caring, respectful rapport with students, and students, in turn, showed respect for teachers and their classmates.

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?

The Webster Elementary School is proud of its accomplishments and has the capacity to host visitors from other schools and districts. One Webster parent asserted that Webster's experience proves that "This school is more than bricks and mortar." In fact, as previously stated, this is the last school year that the talented Webster faculty and leadership will be serving its students within this facility. Next year, the school community will move into the newly built, state-of-the-art George Keeverian K-8 Elementary School.

The Principal is an articulate, competent communicator and is effective at making people feel welcome, as he does every morning in greeting students at the front door of the schoolhouse. The Superintendent, Assistant Superintendents and Title I administration have effectively influenced the school's initiatives and are articulate in presenting the school's improvement process and programs in detail. The faculty and staff are eager to host visitors into their classrooms as well as provide information about the school's climate and approach to teaching and learning.

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

The Panel Review team agreed without exception that there are no reasons why the Webster Elementary School should not be designated as a Commonwealth Compass School

CONCLUSION

The Webster School community has established a clear focus on standards-based teaching and learning through the implementation of effective improvement initiatives that could be replicated in other schools with a similar profile. At the heart of all school improvement efforts is a strong commitment, school and district-wide, to make the Learning Standards set forth in the *Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks* accessible to all students. The Webster Elementary School definitely demonstrates the willingness and capacity to serve as a model of effective practices and successful improvement initiatives. Administration and staff at the school and district levels similarly cite the linkage of systemic, strategic planning to state Standards for both teaching and learning as a critical factor in achieving the sustained advances in student performance evident at the Webster School.

APPENDIX A
Panel Members

Geri Lyn Ajemian, Ed.D., Chair, MA Department of Education, Malden, MA

Eileen Kenny, Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education, New Bedford Public Schools

Maureen Scala-Freeman, Administrative Intern and Teacher, Medford Public Schools

Janet Baptista, Teacher, Cobbett Elementary School, Lynn Public Schools

APPENDIX B
Candidate Compass School Panel Review Schedule

All activities take place at the school.

- 7:30—8:00 a.m. Panelists meet with the Principal
- 8:00—8:30 a.m. Panelists meet with the School Council
- 8:30—9:00 a.m. Panelists meet with parents and students

Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D
Student 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
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; 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*

	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—2:30 p.m. Closing meeting with the Principal to discuss next steps (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 Each Panelist will observe at least two class lessons in order to obtain a representative sample of the school's classrooms. The purpose of the classroom observations in candidate Compass Schools is to find evidence of the extent to which the improvement initiatives the school has described as having the most positive impact on student achievement are in practice in the classroom. Observers will also gather additional information on those 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.