

School Panel Review Report James F. Sullivan Middle School Lowell Public Schools

Introduction

The purpose of the School Panel Review Process is to assist the Commissioner of Education in determining whether State intervention is needed to guide improvement efforts in schools where students' MCAS performance is not at a level that reaches the school's Adequate Yearly Progress targets in English language arts or mathematics or both. The Sullivan Middle School met these criteria and was one of sixteen schools selected for panel review in winter, 2004. The panel review was conducted on February 9-10, 2004.

The review panel's charge was to analyze data and written information on the school's performance and improvement efforts, visit the school, and meet with school and district officials in order to advise the Commissioner on the answers to the following two key questions:

1. Does the school have a sound plan for improving student performance?
2. Are the conditions in place for the successful implementation of the school's improvement plan(s)?

The panel's responses to the two key questions that defined the scope of its review are included in this report. These findings and conclusions are the product of the panel's analysis, discussion, and observation, based on the evidence available to it. A list of panel members who participated in the review is provided in Appendix A. A detailed schedule of the panel's activities is provided in Appendix B.

The panel's findings and conclusions on the two key questions will be forwarded to the Commissioner of Education for consideration, together with school performance data, in determining whether Sullivan Middle School is deemed under-performing. The panel was not asked to formulate a sound plan for school improvement where such a plan does not presently exist or to recommend a course of action to create the conditions for successful implementation of sound improvement strategies where such conditions at present do not appear to exist. Diagnostic and/or prescriptive intervention, where needed to assist an under-performing school, occurs at the next stage of the school review process.

James Sullivan Middle School Profile

Enrollment

The James Sullivan School is one of seven schools serving students in the middle level grades in Lowell. The Sullivan School serves 700 students within a grade 5 through 8 configuration, with enrollment figures remaining steady over the last four years. The demographic makeup of the student body has also remained consistent from 2001 to 2004. Slightly over 50 percent of the school's total student population has been White; with Hispanics accounting for the second largest group with a 35 percent average. Black numbered two percent and Asians 10 percent.

The percentage of low-income students has steadily increased over the last four years at the Sullivan School, from 40 percent in 2001 to 60 percent in 2004. The proportion of students for whom English is not a First Language fluctuated between 21 and 43 percent in the last four years. The percentage of Limited English Proficient students doubled from 15 percent in 2003 to 33 percent in 2004. The school reported 17 percent of students received special education services in 2003; this year 15 percent are enrolled in special education programs.

In 2003, attendance at the Sullivan School was 94.5 percent. The number of days students are absent on average steadily decreased from 14 in 2000 to 9.2 in 2003. Retentions averaged 1.7 percent in 2003. In-school suspensions rose to 6.4 percent in 2003 from zero the previous year. Although out-of-school suspensions fell to 18.7 percent in 2003 from 25.8 percent in 2001, the rate was still much higher than the state average of 6.1 percent.

Staffing

In the 2003-2004 school year, Sullivan Middle School reported having 69 faculty and administrative staff members. Sullivan students are taught by 47 full time teachers, one long-term substitute, and 7 teacher aides. The school administration consists of the Principal, Acting Principal, and Curriculum Facilitator. The central staff includes two guidance counselors, two librarians, one nurse and six specialists. Over one half (54 percent) of the staff has been at the school for less than five years. All but one of the teachers are certified in the subjects they teach.

MCAS Overview

Students at the Sullivan School are assessed in English language Arts (ELA) in grade 7 and in mathematics in grades 6 and 8. In 2003, the school failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in the aggregate and for its special education subgroup in ELA.¹ Between 1999 and 2003, the school made AYP twice in ELA. In mathematics, the school failed to make AYP in the aggregate and for its Asian and White subgroups. Since 1999 the school has not been found to make AYP in mathematics.

Student Performance in English Language Arts

GRADE 7

Regular Education

The performance of regular education students at the grade 7 level in ELA has shown some improvement since 2001. In 2001, 34 percent of students performed at the Proficient level; 49 percent in Needs Improvement, and 17 percent in Warning. The next year the proportion of

¹ In accordance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001, student performance is disaggregated by the following subgroups: Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Free/Reduced Lunch, African-American/Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native American, and White. A minimum of 20 students per subgroup is required to issue a statistically sound rating or determination of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). In 2003, the Sullivan School's qualifying subgroups included: Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Free/Reduced Priced Lunch, Hispanic and White in ELA. In mathematics, in addition to all the ELA subgroups there was Asian.

proficient and advanced students rose to by 10 percentage points to 44 percent. Forty-three percent of students scored at the Needs Improvement level and 13 percent in Warning. In 2003, 49 percent of students performed at the Proficient or Advanced levels, and 48 percent scored at the Needs Improvement level. The proportion of students performing at Warning fell to two percent.

Special Education

In 2001 when the grade 7 ELA test was first administered, 13 percent of special education students at the Sullivan School performed at the Needs Improvement level, and 87 percent were at Warning. In 2002, fewer than 10 students were assessed. In 2003, one half of special education students scored at Needs Improvement and the remaining 50 percent performed at the Warning level.

Limited English Proficient

In 2001, 21 percent of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students scored at the Needs Improvement level. The remaining 79 percent performed at the Warning level. In 2002, no LEP students were assessed. Last year, seven percent were found proficient; 30 percent were in need of improvement; and 63 percent performed at Warning.

Student Performance in Mathematics

GRADE 6

Regular Education

At the grade 6 level, the performance of regular education students has shown consistent improvement since the test was first administered in 2001. In 2001, 24 percent of students were Proficient and Advanced; 37 percent performed at the Needs Improvement level; 39 percent at Warning. The following year, the proportion of Proficient and Advanced students increased to 34 percent. Twenty-eight percent of students were at the Needs Improvement level and 38 percent performed at Warning. In 2003, the percentage of Proficient and Advanced students remained constant, while the proportion of those at the Needs Improvement level increased to 40 percent and those at Warning decreased to 26 percent.

Special Education

The performance of special education students in grade 6 mathematics has worsened in the last three years at the Sullivan School. In 2001, 17 percent of students were Proficient and 83 percent performed at the Warning level. The next year, the proportion of Proficient students fell to 13 percent; 17 percent were at the Needs Improvement level; 70 percent were at Warning. In 2003, the percentage of Proficient students was further reduced to three percent. Eleven percent of students scored at the Needs Improvement level and 86 percent performed at the Warning level.

Limited English Proficient

In 2001, 21 percent of LEP students performed at the Needs Improvement level and 79 percent at Warning. In 2002, no LEP students were assessed at this grade level. Last year, six percent performed at the Proficient level, 13 percent at Needs Improvement, and 81 percent at Warning.

GRADE 8

Regular Education

The performance of regular education students at the grade 8 level in mathematics has shown no significant improvement in the last four years. In 2000, 12 percent of students tested were proficient and advanced, 26 percent performed at the Needs Improvement level, and the majority (62 percent) at Warning. In 2001, 14 percent of students were found proficient, and equal percentages (43) performed at the Needs Improvement and Warning levels. The following year, 15 percent of scores were at the Proficient level, 40 percent in Needs Improvement, and 45 percent in Warning. In 2003, 14 percent of students were proficient and advanced. The proportion of those in need of improvement fell to 33 percent as Warning rose to 53 percent.

Special Education

In 2000, fewer than 10 special education students were assessed at the grade 8 level in mathematics. In 2001, eight percent of students tested performed at the Needs Improvement level and the remaining 92 percent in Warning. In 2002, all students scored in the Warning level. Student performance last year mirrored that of 2001.

Limited English Proficient

In 2000, fewer than 10 LEP students were assessed at this grade level. In 2002, five percent of those assessed were at the Needs Improvement level and the remaining at Warning. In 2002, fewer than 10 students were tested. In 2003, all students scored at the Warning level.

PANEL RESPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS

Note to the Reader: The Sullivan F. Middle School experienced a sudden change in leadership in September/October of 2003. As a result, documents submitted for panel review were authored by the previous principal as well as by this year's acting principal. Since the effectiveness of their documents differ — as well as the school's culture, as conveyed by those interviewed — the reader is reminded to take into account these changes while considering the panel's report.

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

The panel review team responds to Key Question 1 with a 'qualified no.' Team members deliberated at length about whether the Sullivan F. Middle School's improvement plan was sufficiently sound and were unable to reach full consensus in their decision. A clear majority of the panel review team felt the analysis of previous school improvement efforts, the identification of critical root causes, and articulation of related specific student learning objectives were inadequate to ensure a sound plan. As a result, current plans present a weak link between improvement efforts and increased student achievement. Team members felt these deficiencies from the early stages of the school's improvement planning presented a critical weakness that could undermine even the most promising efforts at Sullivan. Minority opinion from the review team supported a 'qualified yes' response to this question based on the strength of the current district and school leadership, the staff's demonstrated commitment to improved student learning, and the school's most recent improvement plans. The panel review team agreed that recent progress and momentum are noteworthy and promising.

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

No. The Sullivan F. Middle School has not fully analyzed appropriate data and program information to identify the root causes of student performance gaps. The school's leadership and staff have not thoroughly investigated disaggregated data from multiple sources of student assessments to identify the specific performance gaps and learning needs of the school's low income students (60 percent of school population), English language learners (33 percent), and special education students (15 percent). In addition, a thorough analysis of previous school improvement efforts and instructional programs has not been done. As a result, school and district leadership lack clarity about causes of persistent low student achievement results, illustrated in the superintendent's remark during the panel review visit, "It's been a little mysterious to me as to why they haven't made progress."

Multiple forms of assessment have not been utilized effectively within the school for investigating root causes of low student achievement. On-site panel review interviews with the School Improvement Team indicate that earlier MCAS and Terra Nova data analysis was done predominantly by the district and that previous school leadership reviewed and agreed with the district's conclusions and prioritization. The newly developed *2003-05 School Improvement Plan* describes supplementing this data analysis with results from a district-wide math test, computerized pre- and post- math testing, and individualized reading assessments. However, none of this data was cited within the school's documentation or referenced within teacher focus groups or administrative interviews. As a result, it appears the district and previous principal have driven much of the root cause analysis and it has centered heavily on annual MCAS and Terra Nova results.

Root causes cited within the School Improvement Plan are not fully analyzed. One root cause declares, "The school's concept of literacy wasn't clearly defined across grade levels." This statement does not identify whether this problem was rooted in communication issues, professional development needs, lack of teacher commitment to the literacy program, or the literacy program itself, nor does it describe how this challenge caused poor student performance.

While the school's improvement goals reflect careful attention to the central realms of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, the school has not yet unearthed root causes of low student achievement through analysis of multiple forms of achievement data.

School improvement planning at the Sullivan School has not included a thorough analysis of previous school improvement efforts and instructional programs. For example, the school changed from a block schedule for alternate day instruction in mathematics and literacy instruction to a schedule providing daily instruction in each. This change, while supported by the professional staff, was not built upon careful analysis of the current use of instructional time and effectiveness of instructional practice within the block schedule format. Therefore, changes for improvement are heavily based upon teacher observation and intuition, but not substantiated with thorough analysis of pre-existing instructional practices, student performance under those conditions, or identification of specific student achievement needs. In teacher interviews, staff members were often unable to articulate why a specific change in instructional programming would impact student achievement. As a result, causal links between current change initiatives and improvement in student achievement appear weak.

Leadership and staff have not conducted a detailed analysis of student subgroup data and framed improvement initiatives in response to this data. As one example, the Executive Summary of the School Improvement Plan states the number of students on Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) at Sullivan has increased dramatically. According to Sullivan's 2003 MCAS results, 86 percent of grade six special education students performed within the Warning category in mathematics, as well as 92 of eighth grade special education students. However, there is no further discussion or description of improvement goals for special education students. In addition, the report does not indicate whether crossover of student populations has been analyzed as it impacts student achievement, such as the specific demographics of the 51 percent free and reduced lunch population or the percentage of English language learners within Sullivan's special education population. Without more detailed analysis, Sullivan's school improvement goals rely on a broad orientation that may overlook critical issues impacting student achievement.

Despite the need for further data and program analysis at Sullivan, the School Improvement Team has engaged in some important work through a modified Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) process. During this work, as described in the current School Leadership Report, the team analyzed MCAS and Terra Nova student achievement results, brainstormed possible causes of weaknesses in student performance, analyzed previous school improvement plans, aligned curricular programs with district and state learning objectives, and reviewed and redesigned the school day schedule. According to administration and staff interviews, these activities have increased staff engagement and familiarity with student achievement as represented in MCAS performance data, improved staff commitment to standards-based program changes, and supported teachers' understanding and use of current best practice. District leadership concurs, stating, "I think they are discovering the power of using more specific data about student performance. That's a district issue that we're working on, figuring out what data is useful." In addition to an increasing focus on the use of quantitative data, school leadership has demonstrated a responsiveness to qualitative data, encouraging increased teacher engagement and more effective distributed leadership for school improvement. The panel review team

acknowledges the school's hard work in these areas, but notes that progress rests on uncertain ground without comprehensive data analysis to clarify the causes of students' stalled improvement and to provide a clear rationale for selected improvement activities.

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

No. Sullivan's School Improvement Plan does not consistently set forth specific improvement objectives that are grounded in causal analysis. Student Learning Goals are in line with Adequate Yearly Progress targets. However, Mathematics and ELA Student Learning Objectives (pgs. 6-7) are, at times, too broad, not targeted on student learning, or not clearly connected to causal analysis, as described in 1A, above. Often, Student Learning Objectives are articulated as professional development or programmatic goals, and those that focus on student learning are sometimes not articulated in specific terms that professional staff can address and assess in the classroom context.

The inconsistency in Student Learning Objectives confuses the Plan's intended focus on student achievement. Some objectives reflect standards-based goals, such as, "All students will be able to compare, order, and translate among whole numbers, integers, fractions, and decimals." Others are phrased in generic or expansive terms that are unwieldy and difficult to assess, such as, "All students will learn high-level skills and concepts defined by the MA Curriculum Frameworks, with emphasis on Patterns, Relations and Algebra; Data Analysis, Statistics and Probability; Geometry; Number Sense and Operations; and Measurement." This objective uses generic language ("high level skills") and encompasses all of the mathematics strands in the MA Curriculum Frameworks. As currently stated, it cannot guide efforts for improved mathematics achievement. Still other Student Learning Objectives are stated as professional development strategies and do not articulate outcomes for student learning. One such goal states, "All students will be engaged in a Comprehensive Balanced Literacy Program that focuses on a standards-based approach to reading and instruction that will occur through modeling, guided practice, independent practice, and application." Much of the School Improvement Plan describes action steps for introducing programmatic change in this manner. There is, by contrast, relatively little description of student outcomes and achievement measures from which to gauge student progress. These weaknesses were noted in the district's February 2003 Evaluation Rubric; however, school leadership did not make relevant revisions and district follow-through seems not to have occurred.

Lack of focus on specific student achievement outcomes appears to have clouded the staff's understanding of school improvement, as evidenced within the Instructional Staff Survey results. When asked to describe what they are expected to do to improve student performance according to the School Improvement Plan, many teachers describe their role in terms of programs, not specific student learning outcomes. Typical responses include, "1) Balanced Literacy, 2) John Collins, 3) Connected Math," or "I participated in SIOP training and have an understanding as to how to enable ELL students to receive language-based learning strategies. *Connected Math* is implemented at our school." While many staff members spoke enthusiastically during focus groups and individual interviews about newly adopted programs, professional development

efforts, and their changing instructional practice, their inability to articulate specific student learning objectives as the focus of their work indicates the Improvement Plan is not an adequate guide to teachers' actions.

Nonetheless, articulation of specific actions for improving student learning is increasingly evident in each stage of Sullivan's school improvement planning. While the School Goals and Student Learning Objectives in the School Improvement Plan (pgs. 6–7) were often broad or rooted in programmatic changes and professional development efforts, the identification of activities, participants, resources, timelines, and measures of implementation in the Action Plan (pgs. 16–34) provides more specific and sequenced steps in introducing these programmatic changes and professional development initiatives at Sullivan. The school's most recent documents (PIM, steps 9 and 10, received on site) now specify activities for the ongoing collection and review of student assessments and demonstrate broad-based school involvement. While the school's improvement goals do not yet satisfy the need for a clear guide, the panel notes a trend toward increasingly specific, achievable, and measurable goals focused on teaching and learning evident in the most recent additions to the document.

At present, however, improvement objectives are not clearly connected to root causes in low student achievement, as described above and in 1A. Some of the school's Student Learning Objectives do not focus on specific student learning outcomes, including clear measures for gauging student progress. Current leadership and staff are now working productively with the District Coordinator for School Improvement in these efforts. Based on leadership interviews and staff focus groups, the panel believes the Sullivan School is building effective internal capacity to continue this work.

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

Yes. The most recent additions to the School Improvement Plan (Steps 9 & 10 of the modified PIM process) include specific strategies that are tied more explicitly to student learning. The document, "Instructional Change Benchmarks" (Step 9) describes major strategies, methods for collecting information, evidence of quality implementation, and timelines. One instructional strategy in this document, for example, states, "Grade 5 and 6 ELA teachers will engage students in the Independent Reading component of the Balanced Literacy Program," then lists four specific aspects of targeted instruction. Assessment evidence for this strategy includes both informal classroom observation checklists completed by supervisors, as well as student assessment information for review by the School Improvement and Literacy Teams. The "PIM Calendar of Activities" (Step 10) further specifies classroom evidence, student assessments, and staff responsibilities. While these plans focus primarily on factors that directly influence student learning, they also describe efforts that are less direct influences, including the creation of a demonstration math classroom, parent education, and reorganization of schedules to provide increased time for ELA and mathematics instruction. These documents have been distributed to staff for their review and response.

While many strategies identified on earlier school improvement documents were heavily focused on district-mandated program adoption and implementation, the most recent Sullivan documents demonstrate a dramatic change in focus. Recent efforts present a clearly phased implementation process for research-based ELA and mathematics program adoption. In addition, plans offer an improved presentation that makes connections among curriculum adoption, classroom instructional strategies, and monitoring for improved student achievement. The persistent weakness in these improvement plans rests in their separation from a thorough analysis of root causes during the initial stages of the School Improvement Planning process, as described in 1A.

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

Yes. The recently completed components of the school's improvement planning documents are clear and useful guides for improvement initiatives at Sullivan. In fact, during teacher interviews, panel review members noted that some staff showed School Improvement Plans that were marked throughout in pencil as working drafts, suggesting Sullivan's improvement plans are being used as living documents to guide current work.

Instructional Change Benchmarks (PIM, step #9) were recently distributed to staff. If accepted and used by the staff, this document's clear action steps will guide periodic assessment of staff progress on current initiatives, including staff training in mathematics, ELA, and ELL instructional strategies, as well as oversight of program adoption and implementation. As an example of this recent, effective planning, two major strategies targeted for Hispanic students state, "Provide Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) training for all teachers," and "All trained teachers will implement SIOP including language and content objectives in their lessons." Sullivan's target is 100 percent participation in training with accountability for implementation assessed through classroom observations by the school's principal and assistant principal using a SIOP rubric, as well as evidence of lesson planning that incorporates both content and language objectives. Training began in the fall of 2004 with full implementation and quarterly reviews anticipated by spring of 2005. This document also includes Student Learning Benchmarks that articulate the frequency of assessment data collection, 80 percent or higher targets for achievement, and responsible parties for ensuring progress on identified Student Learning Objectives. One related benchmark states, "All Hispanic students will acquire and use new vocabulary correctly in reading and writing." All Hispanic students at Sullivan, grades five through eight, are identified for periodic assessment ("February 2004, April 2004, November/December 2004, February 2005, April 2005") using writing prompts developed from the grades four and seven ELA MCAS Test Bank. ELA teachers and the school's Literacy Team are identified as responsible parties. The method and tools for evaluation of student work are not yet identified within these plans and only generally described in staff interviews.

Other recent documents (School Improvement Action Plan and PIM, step #10) articulate further specifics of Sullivan's improvement planning. These include a thorough list of training and improvement activities, specific and realistic dates for implementation, necessary resources and assistance, staff and administrative oversight and improved linkage between improvement objectives and intended student learning outcomes. In the PIM plan, for example, dates are

identified for staff correction of student assessments (“February 23-27: All Teachers Administer & Correct Multiple Choice; Literacy and Math Teams Correct Open Response”), as well as for “data review” by Math and Literacy Study Teams. While “data review” and “data analysis” are not synonymous, evidence indicates the staff at Sullivan is increasingly involved with investigating student work and discussing results in collaborative settings. In addition, School Improvement Planning Team activities include the task, “Plan Revision” each month, suggesting this leadership team intends to be responsive to teacher feedback and student assessment results. Overall, these recent written plans present an aggressive, specific, and useful plan for improvement activity at Sullivan and demonstrate broad-based, appropriate staff involvement.

Despite recent improvements in the school’s written plans, the earlier stages in the school improvement process still retain weaknesses in the identification of root causes, student learning objectives expressed in terms related to student achievement, and consistent identification of those responsible for ensuring progress.

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

Yes, the School Improvement Plan is now being developed and implemented through an inclusive, participatory process that has engaged broad-based teacher commitment and leadership. This was evidenced, in part, during administrative and staff interviews as well as teacher focus groups. School leadership stated in an interview, “Past initiatives did not get off the ground. Teachers had no buy in or input.” This was amplified during an interview with a school support specialist who commented, “Staff had the integrity and desire to do a good job before. Staff has always wanted to participate. Now they are counted on to do more.” Teachers reported feeling “nurtured” and “valued” under new leadership and expressed appreciation for “open” and “two-way” communications that now take place at the school. The panel witnessed an inclusive and collaborative climate and positive relationships between leaders and the instructional staff.

A team-based leadership approach supports the school’s progress and commitment. The School Improvement Team, comprised of both ELA and mathematics teachers as well as school specialists, meets monthly to oversee improvement plans and to revise plans as necessary. According to interviews with administration, this team, in concert with school leaders, has begun to work more closely and productively with the District Coordinator for School Improvement than under previous leadership. Teacher-based Math and Literacy Teams also meet monthly to collect and review student assessments and to problem solve implementation of newly adopted mathematics and literacy initiatives. Some members of these teams also serve on the School Improvement Team, supporting effective communication among the groups regarding assessments, concerns, and new layers in the school improvement process. In addition, all staff members have weekly common planning times for professional development and to discuss curriculum planning and individual student concerns. The delineation of roles and coordination among these various teams appears clear to staff. This team structure has effectively encouraged and supported the staff’s broad-based engagement.

Implementation of the School Improvement Plan is currently underway. Initial review of the Instructional Staff Survey results raised doubts for panel review members who noted many staff members held fragmented understanding of their role in the school's improvement efforts. However, on-site classroom observations and follow-up interviews, as well as teacher focus groups and Mathematics and Literacy Team interviews, illustrated a growing focus on student learning throughout the staff. Effective integration and application of instructional strategies related to current mathematics and ELA initiatives was evident during twelve of the panel's fourteen classroom observations. Typically, lesson objectives were made explicit for students, for example, problem solving strategies were posted in classrooms, vocabulary lists and word walls were evident, and teachers used the "Launch, Explore, Summary" lesson format integral to *Connected Math* instruction. Students appeared familiar with the use of evaluation rubrics, cooperative learning strategies, and expectations for time on task and focused engagement. Follow-up staff interviews revealed teachers' growing familiarity with new assessment strategies, such as Balanced Literacy "Status of the Class" records and evaluation rubrics, as well as their ability to describe relevant instructional goals and objectives for class lessons. In addition, in focus groups, students referenced new mathematics and ELA program strategies, such as John Collins Focus Correction Areas and math warm-ups. Panel review members conclude that the Sullivan staff is well-informed regarding current school improvement initiatives and related responsibilities and that staff support for these initiatives is strong.

Most recent school improvement planning documents (PIM, steps #9 & 10) demonstrate increased attention to assessing ongoing progress and student performance. However, a more thorough review of the effectiveness of previous improvement plans is warranted and explicit demarcations in the current plan for assessing key student performance indicators would strengthen the school's current efforts for success, providing school-wide points for review and discussion of progress, analysis of data, and realignment of district, school, and staff supports for improvement, as necessary.

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

Yes. The panel review team is unanimous in its conclusion that the conditions are currently in place at Sullivan F. Middle School for successful implementation of the school's improvement plans. The school's plans are increasingly specific and purposeful, the school's professional community is building collaborative structures and commitments to sustain improvement efforts, the principal and assistant principal are inviting teacher leadership to refine and propel improvement initiatives, and productive communications have opened doors for problem solving student achievement challenges. The panel review team remains tentative in its conclusions, however, due to potential changes in leadership. District leadership indicates the principal's position will be advertised soon and current leadership is considering application. Panel review members concur that sustaining and supporting the school's leadership momentum is of high priority.

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

Yes. The Sullivan School currently has effective leadership and sound management. Instructional Staff Survey Results indicate 88 percent of the staff agrees or strongly agrees that the current principal “provides effective leadership to guide and support staff efforts to improve the academic performance of our students.” The school’s leaders are creating a positive school culture and strengthening morale that teachers report was weakened under the previous administration. Effective two-way communication and team-based structures have been established to enable the school’s professionals to contribute to improvement efforts (see 1E). Teacher testimony indicates support and appreciation for current leadership and the opportunity to participate in school improvement efforts. Teachers report feeling “valued,” “nurtured,” and “respected as professionals.” Under current leadership, teachers report feeling the administrators’ presence in classrooms is positive and supportive. This was corroborated during a separate interview with school leadership, when the principal stated, “If teachers say this is difficult, we ask what can we do to support you? We encourage them to collaborate and support each other. This staff has great potential and skills for effective collaboration.” School leadership further explains, “Staff is beginning to feel like they really have a voice. In the past, they may have spoken, but they have not always felt they have been heard. Staff is beginning to feel like they can really be involved.” District leadership agrees, stating, “Energy seem to be released with this change in leadership. It’s positive and can be channeled. I think the faculty will now stabilize, as a result.”

Current leadership communicates high expectations for students and staff. During interviews, the principal noted, “We are making sure *all* children are being exposed to the same rich curriculum all the time. All of our Spanish language teachers have been taking the math training. No matter what class you walk into, they’re all being exposed to the same high level instruction in math. They know we’re coming in and looking for these things.” These expectations are made explicit through the use of a “Look For” rubric for grades six through eight classrooms using the new *Connected Math* program. The rubric includes a series of twenty-one indicators divided among the “Launch, Explore, Summary” segments of the *Connected Math* lesson format. The principal and assistant principal stated in interviews that they provide teachers with direct feedback using these rubrics following classroom observations. During teacher interviews, this form of feedback was described as useful and supportive as teachers worked to apply new teaching strategies. Teachers also expressed understanding that they are accountable for implementing programmatic initiatives across the school and demonstrated familiarity with explicit implementation goals described within the latest improvement plans. As an additional note, student discussion during focus groups also mirrored the school’s overall high expectations. Twenty-five students in grades five through eight recounted high aspirations for themselves in response to the question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” All responses indicated careers where college level and advanced degrees are required. Students drew clear connections between attending school, graduating, and attaining these positions. They described Sullivan staff as “caring,” as holding high expectations for students, and as encouraging students to care about themselves and others. The principal confirmed in interview, “I don’t think teachers here write any kid off.”

Current school leadership demonstrates sound management strategies. The principal has established team-based leadership structures and operations within and across the school. In

concert with district support and others on the school's administrative team, current leadership is conducting regular "walk throughs" in classrooms to build comprehensive knowledge about existing teaching practice, and to create expectations and accountability systems for implementing the school's improvement initiatives. During classroom visits, leaders use "look for" checklists, designed to provide feedback to practitioners about the implementation of the instructional strategies identified in the school's improvement plan. In addition, throughout the panel visit, the school appeared to function smoothly despite a student breaking his leg at the start of the school day, receiving word that a staff member's wife had collapsed and been rushed to the emergency room, and needing to reschedule dozens of teachers so they could participate in panel interviews. The administrative team conveyed a sense of fluid and collaborative teamwork that clearly supports the effective management of the school.

While the panel declares confidence in the staff's support of Sullivan's new leadership and current improvement planning efforts, it expresses uncertainty about whether all student and parent stakeholders are being effectively engaged in the school's initiatives. During interviews, the panel review team heard occasional concerns about the English language learner student and parent populations at Sullivan. School Council members discussed frustration at not being able to engage Hispanic parents in council activities. According to support staff interviews, this population includes primarily families from Puerto Rico, Columbia, and the Dominican Republic. One staff member shared concern about the loss of ELL tutors who speak students' first languages. Another made a passionate plea that there is a sense of disconnect between these students and others in the school community, citing a sort of "silent prejudice" within the school community. Additionally, 35 percent of respondents to the December 2003 Instructional Staff Survey indicate some aspect of English language learners and/or ELL transfers are "the most significant barriers to improving student performance." In fact, the Executive Summary of the 2003-05 School Improvement Plan states that the number of migrant-status students is seven times higher than it was one year ago. District administration demonstrates awareness of these issues when she stated that new leadership at Sullivan "has to have a deep commitment to equity because he or she could give in and not tend to those least advantaged." She added that the greatest demand is to integrate English language learners into the school community. Since improving ELL achievement is specified in the School Improvement Plan, the panel notes questions about the effective inclusion of ELL students and parents in current plans for progress.

Overall, however, the superintendent summarizes Sullivan's recent success, stating the staff is "accepting full responsibility for educating the kids they have," and that "they are realizing there is more in our control than out of our control. Current leadership is strengthening and supporting this critical sense of efficacy across the staff.

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

Yes. Evidence indicates staff support for the school's planned improvement efforts. According to the December 2003 Instructional Staff Survey Results, 90 percent of staff agree or strongly agree that the school "has a well-defined plan for reaching student performance goals." Furthermore, 92 percent agree or strongly agree that, "The curriculum implemented in our school is effective and appropriate." Teacher "buy in" for the school's improvement initiatives was cited during

interviews with the school leaders and linked to the team-based staff leadership approach currently used in the school. The principal writes in the School Leadership Report, “The immediate result of these collaborative efforts has been increased staff buy-in and renewed commitment to improving instruction and learning for all students.” This was further supported during teacher interviews, evidenced in broad-based teacher participation on school teams and committees, and during classroom observations where teachers were clearly employing new instructional strategies in their lessons. Staff survey results indicate that currently, 86 – 98 percent of teachers meet once or more each week to plan lessons, discuss student work, and/or discuss strategies and services for individual students. Although the panel review team was not provided with actual numbers of staff who have attended the various district training sessions, school leaders described active staff involvement and expected nearly all staff to be trained in ELL strategies by the end of this school year. High levels of engagement and commitment for school improvement efforts are evident across the professional community at Sullivan.

The review panel notes that while Instructional Staff Survey Results indicate 86 percent of staff feel they are “well informed about the initiatives that are undertaken by our school leadership and staff,” actual narrative responses indicate staff confusion about whether their role is focused on programmatic initiatives or specific student learning objectives. In addition, while staff rarely placed blame for low student achievement on external factors during interviews, staff survey results indicate 21 out of 45 staff members place some degree of blame for low achievement on English language learners, raising further concern about the integration and acceptance of ELLs in the school community and their perceived role in the school’s struggles (see 2A). Staff support for the school’s improvement initiatives appears strong, however these issues warrant continued staff discussion.

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

Yes. The Sullivan F. Middle School is receiving adequate district guidance and support. In fact, school leadership says in interview, “District support is more than adequate and responsive. We have a whole ELL team at the district level who is immediately there for us whenever we call. All departments from the central office are involved in student success at the Sullivan School.” The School Leadership Report further describes the availability of comprehensive district supports and describes district involvement in the development of the Sullivan Improvement Plan. Interviews with the superintendent and District Coordinator for School Improvement corroborated the coordinator’s direct involvement with the staff during the most recent stages of the PIM process. The coordinator described unsuccessful attempts to engage Sullivan’s previous leadership in an effective school improvement planning process, as well as successful interactions with the school’s new leaders and positive engagement with the staff, starting with building group norms and building understanding of “what it really means to implement a plan.” In addition to the ongoing involvement of the Coordinator for School Improvement, the superintendent noted Sullivan’s principal receives direct support from the deputy superintendent throughout this year, although the type and frequency of supports were not discussed. Furthermore, she added, administrators are typically out of their buildings two times per month for intensive training related to current initiatives. The superintendent and principal both cited district-led monthly “Leadership Academies” and a four-day summer institute as

ongoing sources of professional development for principals, assistant principals, and district support personnel.

The district has invested substantially in district-wide professional development for staff and classroom instructional resources (materials, software, manipulatives) in support of the implementation of district-mandated ELA, mathematics, and ELL initiatives. Seventy-four percent of Sullivan's instructional staff indicated that professional development is available and adequate. During an interview, the superintendent reported that the district provides substantial professional development in coaching, classroom observation, sheltered English instruction, literacy, integrating technology, and mathematics. She noted that Sullivan has a little more job-embedded math support than some of the other schools. During the leadership transition at Sullivan, in fact, district leadership asked an assistant principal from another school in the district to come to Sullivan due, in large part, to her expertise in math. In addition, the superintendent indicated that every Lowell middle school has a full-time instructional specialist who works directly with staff to support instructional changes.

Despite comprehensive district involvement and supports, professional staff at Sullivan articulated additional needs during panel interviews, focused primarily on supporting improved achievement for special education and ELL students. Staff revealed a concern for appropriate tutors who speak students' first languages, technology support, and inclusion assistants targeted toward providing effective integration and instructional supports. Finally, during on-site interviews, staff expressed concern about the impact of large class sizes on the school's student achievement goals. This was corroborated in the December 2003 Instructional Staff Survey, where one third of respondents indicated issues of high student/teacher ratio and/or class size as among the most significant barriers to improving student performance at Sullivan.

CONCLUSION

The Sullivan Middle School has recently experienced a change in leadership that has positively impacted momentum for school improvement initiatives and the school's overall professional culture. The panel review team agrees the Sullivan F. Middle School is on the cusp of launching meaningful school improvement efforts.

Based on careful review of school documents and achievement records, the panel review team concludes the Sullivan School has not yet constructed a sound plan for improving student performance. The school's use of a modified PIM process has been productive, particularly this year with the direct support of the District School Improvement Coordinator. While components of the School Improvement Plan have become increasingly specific and useful, critical weaknesses remain at the foundations of the planning process. Problems with unidentified root causes of low student achievement and related, unfocused student learning objectives are noted by district and school leadership and are central to the panel's conclusions.

The panel review team is unified in its conclusion that the conditions are in place for successful implementation of improvement plans, although this judgment was somewhat guarded given the unsettled nature of the school's leadership position. Nonetheless, based on persuasive leadership

and staff interviews, classroom observations, and staff surveys, the staff at Sullivan has stepped forward under the current administration, ready to take on leadership, to engage in professional development and instructional change, and to monitor and analyze student achievement. The staff has demonstrated competence and commitment and is poised to improve student learning. Early indicators demonstrate that current Sullivan leaders have been successful in meeting the school's challenges. Panel members acknowledge the administration's and staff's energized commitment and dedication to improved teaching and learning at Sullivan.

APPENDIX A Team Members

George Blaisedell, Panel Chair, is a consultant for SchoolWorks and was a former superintendent for the North Andover Public Schools.

Susan Henry, Panel Co-Chair, is a consultant for SchoolWorks and a National Board Certified teacher in the Acton Public Schools.

Geri Lyn Ajemian, Panel Coordinator, represents the Massachusetts Department of Education, Office of Accountability and Targeted Assistance.

Cheryl Forster is Principal of the Ipswich Middle School in the Ipswich Public Schools.

Maureen Scala-Freeman teaches grade six at the Andrews Middle School in the Medford Public Schools.

Robert Norton is Principal of Woburn High School in the Woburn Public Schools.

Carolyn Wyatt is Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum in the Newton Public Schools.

APPENDIX B
UNDER-PERFORMING PANEL REVIEW SCHEDULE
Detailed Schedule for Review Panel School Site Visit

The times specified on the following schedule may be adjusted slightly to align with the daily schedule and practices in each of the schools being reviewed.

Day 1

- 10:30—12:00* Panel chairperson and panel coordinator meet to discuss and clarify roles, prepare for the first team meeting, and review general logistics/schedule for the review. [location: hotel]
- 12:00—2:00 p.m.* **Team meeting # 1:** team meets for the first time to discuss each panelist's individual analysis; team forms preliminary judgements on key questions. [location: hotel]
- 2:00—3:00 p.m.* Panelists meet with the district Superintendent (and Assistant Superintendent, if appropriate). [location: hotel]
- 3:30—4:30 p.m.* Panelists meet with Principal (and one other school-based individual, if appropriate). [location: the school]
- 6:00—8:00 p.m.* **Team meeting # 2:** panelists synthesize interview information, further define findings, prepare questions, and develop a team strategy for Day 2 of the review. [location: hotel]

Day 2

All activities take place in the school

- 7:30—8:00 a.m.* Panelists meet with the Principal
- 8:00—8:30 a.m.* Panelists meet with the School Council
- 8:30—9:00 a.m.* Panelists meet with Focus Groups. The Panel Review Coordinator and the Principal will identify participants for each Focus Group. The groups will be organized, as appropriate, to include groups of individuals who can respond to questions designed for parents, students, classroom teachers, curriculum facilitators, content-area specialists, grade-level instructors, or other specific inquiry groups.

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

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

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

11 a.m.—12:30 p.m. **Team meeting # 3:** panelists meet to discuss findings so far and to plan the remainder of the day (working lunch)

12:30—1:00 p.m. Panelists use time as needed to analyze findings and to gather more information; panelists are encouraged to roam the entire school and visit classrooms not yet seen.

1:00—2:00 p.m. Panelists meet with teachers in groups*; consultant co-chair is free to work on report

	Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D	Panelist E
1:00-1:30	Teacher	Focus Group 1	Teacher	Focus Group 3	Prepare report
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. **Team meeting # 4:** panelists deliberate and form conclusions