

**Panel Report**  
**Candidate Compass School Review**  
**Franklin County Technical School**  
**Franklin County Technical School District**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **The Program**

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

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

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

### **The Report**

This report summarizes the findings and analyses of a small team of education professionals during a one-day visit to the Franklin County Technical School on May 13, 2004. The report will assist the Commissioner in determining which schools from among those visited will be designated to serve as 2003 Commonwealth Compass Schools.

The panel evaluated data and written information on the school's performance and improvement efforts, including the school's two-part Compass School application; and then visited the school

to meet with school leaders, staff, parents and students and visit classrooms in order to answer the following two key questions:

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

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

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

### **School Profile**

The Franklin County Technical School is a vocational high school operated by the Franklin County Technical School District. The school is located in Turners Falls, Massachusetts. The school offers vocational training for the residents of the following district towns: Bernardston, Buckland, Colrain, Conway, Deerfield, Erving (Villages of Millers Falls, Turners Falls, Lake Pleasant, Montague City, Montague Center), New Salem, Northfield, Orange, Shelburne, Warwick, Wendell, and Whately. It also accepts students from non-district towns on a tuition basis. Qualified students receive Title I services in Reading and Math.

The school reports a population of 526 students as of December of 2003. Although this is the highest total reported since 2001, student population has remained steady over the last three years. White students comprise 96% of the student body. Hispanic students make up 2%. Black, Asian, and Native American students each account for one percent.

The school services a special education population that makes up 26% of the student body. The school's Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) population is 25%. There is no data regarding First Language Not English (FLNE) or Limited English Proficient (LEP) students.

The rate of attendance at Franklin County Technical School has remained stable since 2000. The rate for 2003 was 92.2%, which is slightly below the state rate of 93.9. The average number of days absent per pupil was 13.6 days for 2003. Retention rates have fluctuated since 2000. That year the retention rate reached 4.3%. It dipped to 2.4% in 2001 and rose again in 2002 to reach 3.5%. In 2003, the rate once again decreased to 2.2%, which is below the state rate of 2.6 for the same time frame.

The school's dropout rate has seen a trend of decline since 2000 when that rate was 4.3. Rates of 3.7% and 3.2% were reported for school years 2000 and 2001 respectively. In 2003, the rate continued its decline to 2.56%. In-school and out-of-school suspensions are significantly higher than state levels with FCTS reporting a 21.9% rate for in-school suspensions in 2003. The state's rate for that year was 4.5%. The school also reports a 16.1 rate of out-of-school suspensions. The state's figure was 6.1% for 2003. No students were excluded from the school in 2003.

### **Staffing**

The Franklin County Technical School has a superintendent/principal, an assistant principal, a curriculum director, a special education director, a vocational education director, four guidance counselors, and a nurse. There are 53 classroom teachers and three teacher aides. Of the 53 faculty members, 43 have served at the school for more than five years. Of those, 30 have ten or more years experience at FCTS. All academic and vocational teachers are certified in their subject areas.

### **MCAS Results**

The Massachusetts Department of Education 2003 Mid-Cycle AYP Report shows that Franklin County Technical School made Adequate Yearly Progress in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics in the aggregate and for its subgroups. The school's Composite Proficiency Index (CPI) score for ELA was 72.5. This figure reflects a 7.7-point increase for students in the aggregate over the school's Cycle II results. Special Education students saw a 10-point increase in CPI in 2003 ELA scores. In mathematics, the school's score for students in the aggregate was 67.6, which exceeds the state target of 60.8 for the cycle. In addition, this score reflects an 18.8 CPI change in the combined results for all students at FCTS. Special education students scored at 57.5. However, this was an increase of 21.7 points over test results for Cycle II.

## **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?**

The Panel identified a number of programs at Franklin County Technical School (FCTS) that could be replicated in other similarly profiled schools. The key initiatives undertaken by FCTS include an emphasis on Writing Across the Curriculum, the adoption of a school-wide Reading Project, a shift from a traditional high school mathematics program to the more "hands-on" Math Connections, the development of an Integrated Projects approach to bridge the learning between academic and vocational classes, and the implementation of a comprehensive Student Portfolio

program. Panel members saw documentation, classroom practices, and student work that evidenced these programs.

The Panel also found a school-wide culture of collaboration and care for learners. This is evidenced in the willingness of staff to accept and adapt to change, to share ideas and strategies between and among teachers from various disciplines, and to demonstrate genuine concern for the students. The Panel concluded that as much as the improvement initiatives have made an appreciable impact on achievement, these same achievements have been greatly enhanced by the spirit of collegiality and commitment to student learning that typifies the FCTS administration and faculty.

The school's favorable climate did not occur by chance. Administrators and teachers when interviewed cited many examples of shared decision-making and cooperative practices. Furthermore, the elements of a positive, learning environment are clearly defined in the opening lines of the FCTS Mission Statement: all students are able to learn, and that "professional technical training combined with a solid academic education, gives students their best chance at success in life."

The Panel found that the success enjoyed by FCTS in recent years is by and large attributable to a deliberate and focused effort to remain faithful to its mission. The mission serves simultaneously as the centerpiece for a school wide culture centered on concern for people of all ages, backgrounds and talents, while it also provides a framework for programmatic growth and student achievement. As a result the administrative team and staff have adopted and brought to maturity several improvement initiatives to the school. Representatives from other schools wishing to replicate these initiatives need to carefully consider the environment in which these improvements were made.

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

The Panel agrees with the administration and staff of FCTS that the improvement initiatives that have had the greatest impact on student performance results are Writing Across the Curriculum, the implementation of a school wide Reading Program, the selection of Math Connections to replace the existing math curriculum, the integration of projects between academic classes and their vocational counterparts, and the student portfolio process.

All members of the school community are deeply aware of the value of the Writing Across the Curriculum initiative. After an analysis of MCAS data in the year 2000, school leaders took note of the difficulty that students were experiencing in successfully responding to the long composition portion of the MCAS exam. Of similar difficulty were student efforts in answering the open response questions. Initially administrators and staff countered these results by scheduling an increase in the amount of time that students would spend in ELA classes. These

classes would be extended from one period to two (from 45 minutes to 90 minutes) per day. To avoid taking this extra time from vocational class periods, the school implemented integrated projects that bridge academic and vocational classes.

In addition, ELA teachers focused on writing and made students responsible for a number of written essays per year depending on the instructor. Simultaneously, teachers in other subject areas began to incorporate written assignments into their programs of study. ELA teachers shared and modeled the “five-paragraph” essay with their colleagues across the school. This “five-paragraph” outline assists in training students to prepare an introduction to a composition, to add detailed paragraphs for expanded clarity and to develop a summation or concluding paragraph. With every teacher presenting and adhering to the same standard, students were fully immersed in the writing process in all areas of their learning.

In support of the Writing Across the Curriculum initiative, FCTS developed a comprehensive Reading Project for its students. The Superintendent and several ELA teachers interviewed stated that all readings and instructional practices for reading are aligned with the ELA standards in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Teachers will guide and support readers through plays, short stories and various types of literature. Students are required to write either a series of short papers about their readings or, if the teacher prefers, a full report on a particular work. In addition, every student is required to read a selection of a minimum of 500 pages per trimester. Students must then complete an essay in the five-paragraph format mentioned above. Most students are allowed some flexibility in choosing books for outside reading. However, ELA teachers approve all books for both content and reading level-appropriateness.

Like the early MCAS ELA results at FCTS, the math scores for its students were also substandard. The school leadership determined that the traditional delivery of high school mathematics curriculum (Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry) was not yielding desired results. Therefore, in 2001 FCTS adopted the Math Connections program for students in grade nine. Since that time the program has been phased into the school’s academic programming and is now available to students in grades nine through eleven. Twelfth grade students are offered various elective math courses depending on aptitude and interest. The shift to this particular program reflects the school mission to make learning more relevant for students in work that reflects their real world. The focus on the conceptual aspects of mathematics – reasoning, pattern seeking, problem solving, questioning and communication - provided by Math Connections appears to be an ideal fit for both the teacher and learner in a technical school environment. Furthermore, Math Connections relies heavily on writing, which aligns neatly with the FCTS emphasis on Writing Across the Curriculum.

In order to provide students with the skills needed to pass MCAS, FCTS administrators and faculty realized that more time needed to be devoted to writing, reading and mathematics. Once again, the mission of the school became the foundation for change. School leaders were hesitant to assign the additional minutes needed for academic improvement at the expense of the

vocational class time that is the focus of FCTS program. Over a period of time, administrators and staff slowly brought into existence an integrated program that bridges the learning of academic and vocational classes while utilizing the strengths of all teachers.

When the integrated project program began, vocational teachers were encouraged to provide project topics that required students to engage in problem solving. The vocational teachers were also asked to provide a rubric to score the project, deadlines for work completion, assurance of project completion by overseeing student's work, and the percentage to which the project will count toward a trimester grade. Meanwhile teachers in academic classes were enlisted to provide their curriculum and timetable for delivery of that curriculum to vocational teachers. In addition, academic teachers were asked to work with the vocational teachers in developing projects that would integrate academic and vocational skills. For example, an academic science teacher may combine with the automotive shop teacher in an integrated project that focused on auto repair and simple machines. In this way the curricular goals for both academic and vocational classes were addressed.

It was determined that, in keeping with the Frameworks standard for oral presentations, students would present their projects to their peers. Teachers from both areas developed a schedule for presentations. Finally a rubric was developed to score students in the use of visuals, the degree of organization, their personal appearance, their subject knowledge and the fluency of delivery.

After some modification, the standard for integrated projects now calls for a completed shop project, a written explanation of the project and finally, the oral presentation. The cross-discipline element exists in different ways in different shops and academic classes but generally, vocational teachers will support students through the project and check their work for quality and accuracy. Classroom teachers will assist students in the written and spoken portions of the final product. Students' best work is kept in their portfolio.

Administrators, teachers and students interviewed cited the Student Portfolio Program as a key element of the school's programming. Students begin work on their portfolios in grade nine. All students are required to keep the portfolio as a repository for the best work that they have produced. Requirements have been modified since portfolio work was fully implemented at the school in 2001. In general, in order to complete a portfolio in a given year, students must include four essays from their English classes, one integrated project, and one project or essay from each of their other academic classes. Teachers may assign any number of written assignments. They are not limited to the number of essays that must be showcased in the student portfolio. When students have assembled all of their work in the portfolio binder, it is the responsibility of these students to ascertain the signatures of all of their teachers to authenticate the completion of the process.

An innovative and central function of the student portfolio is its use as a requirement for graduation. Like students across Massachusetts, FCTS graduates must pass MCAS and complete

the grade requirements of the school's programming. However, in addition to standard requirements, FCTS graduates must prepare a portfolio that includes three letters of recommendation, a cover letter, a resume, a list of achieved vocational competencies, a record of grades, a record of attendance, three integrated projects, four ELA essays from each grade level, and one project or essay from math, social studies and science at each grade level.

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

Key improvement programs have been initiated and implemented over a period of years in a manner that is in keeping with, and is exemplary of, the culture of collaboration and sharing. Procedurally, all new initiatives are written into the school's annual improvement plan. The School Council must vote to approve or to reject the plans. The plans that have gained acceptance from this school-based body are forwarded to the school committee for approval. It is at the next critical juncture - faculty acceptance and support of an initiative -that the staff demonstrates its inherent willingness to accept and to implement changes that are in keeping with the philosophy of the school. There is no evidence of an official policy in place whereby information regarding new policies is disseminated and formal approval from the faculty required. Likewise the school leadership does not place demands upon the faculty to implement new initiatives according to a specific schedule. The leadership does not unduly influence compliance to policy changes. Instead school leaders take an approach that includes patience, trust and shared responsibility with staff to slowly experiment with an idea, to make it part of everyday practice, and finally to carry it through to implementation and success.

An example of this process is exemplified by the addition of Integrated Projects to the overall school program. Project integration has been a topic of concern for FCTS and other technical schools for some time. Out of necessity due to lagging student test results and infringements on vocational class time, the school once again addressed the issue by bringing a more comprehensive approach to integration of academic and vocational classes to the School Council. Once through procedural channels, the idea was brought to the staff. Teachers interviewed indicated that the proposal met with some resistance at the outset. School leaders were not deterred and simply advised willing members of the faculty to make an effort to integrate the learning that was taking place in academic classes with that of classes in shop settings. In a relatively short time, several teachers had not only designed interdisciplinary lessons but had come to the realization that the reinforcement of learning across different areas of the school was most beneficial to students. Soon, more and more faculty members developed and delivered similar lessons. There is now an academic/vocational class connection between every shop and every regular classroom in the building. In interviews, students readily commented on the positive impact that this connection between their academic studies and the work completed in their shops has had on their learning.

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

Administrative staff and faculty members agree that the initiatives now in place at FCTS can be replicated in similar schools. In order to do so, a creative and flexible scheduling of students, although challenging, may be necessary in other schools. For example, in an effort to maximize learning and to provide ample time for students to complete work, students in each grade, nine through twelve, attend double periods of ELA everyday. In mathematics grade nine and grade ten students also participate in double periods. Eleventh and twelfth graders take one period of math per day. As much as this type of scheduling seems to run in opposition to the philosophy of technical schools, FCTS has made this schedule change, seen improvement in ELA and math and has done so without disruption to vocational programs.

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

Yes. Along with the aforementioned close adherence to its mission and the ELA, math and integrated programs, the school employs a number of innovative processes and procedures that make it a model of effective practices and successful improvement initiatives.

Teachers interviewed stated that a great deal of time is spent in the development of integrated projects and other collaborative efforts. To provide time for this activity, once a month the opening of school is delayed until 10:30 AM. Faculty members will use these times to meet and to work on projects. Teachers do not have any common planning time in their schedules. Despite this, and once again as an indicator of the collegial culture in the building, teachers will take informal opportunities to check on student progress and to discuss the efficacy of their collaborations.

**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?**

Franklin County Vocational administrators and staff without exception are focused on the improvement initiatives mentioned above. The Compass Panel Review Team enjoyed a series of interviews with administrative leaders and teachers wherein the central elements of improvement initiatives were clearly understood and communicated. Just as important is the fact that student interviews garnered the same results. Students are keenly aware of the demands of their academic programs. In addition, they clearly expressed their understanding of the connection between the teaching and learning that takes place in academic classes and the work in their vocational classes.

Superintendent Bassett also provided the Panel with documentation of programs and program modifications that have occurred in the last few years.

**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?**

Teachers interviewed were firm in pointing to the fact that the student portfolio is an extremely important element of the school's work. However, they did assert that it is the skills learned in initiatives like Writing Across the Curriculum, the Reading Project, and Math Connections that have produced the achievement in MCAS scores. This is not to undervalue the impact of the portfolio process. It has been a vital piece in expanding the culture of collaboration and nurturing meaningful relationships with students.

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

Yes. The point of collection for student work is the portfolio. As mentioned above, students must post their exemplary work in a binder and the requirements for both content and quality are most comprehensive. All parties interviewed - including administrators, teachers and students - evidenced the fact that teachers vigorously track the progress of students as they complete their portfolio entries. Teachers are charged with signing off on any segment of the portfolio that is specific to their subject area. In addition, students are assigned a "portfolio advisor" in grade twelve. The advisor's role is to keep in constant contact with students in his/her charge and to guarantee that students produce a portfolio that meets the requirements of graduation.

The school also places a great deal of emphasis in professional development. Each year the school produces a Professional Development Plan Booklet and each year the focus of the plan is aligned with programming within the school. In 1999, for example, the school focused on integrated projects and student portfolios. In subsequent years the focus shifted to standards based lesson planning, and later to authentic assessment.

The school provides opportunities for teachers through a Summer Academy for Professional Development. Teachers are by contract allowed as much as \$1200.00 per year toward the cost of professional development in the form of graduate level coursework or conferences related to the work of the school.

Superintendent Bassett clearly articulates the vision and culture of achievement of the school. The improvements made at the school are impressive further in that the school maintains a relatively high teacher to student ratio in the vocational area. Finally, it important to note that the school's administrative team is solidly behind the superintendent and that this team is heavily involved and invested in improvement efforts at FCTS.

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

Yes. The calm and collegial atmosphere of FCTS provides an inviting setting for school visitations. There are several conference rooms that can serve as meeting areas for discussions or presentations.

Teachers readily welcome observers into their classrooms and shops. Those interviewed were most articulate in explaining how initiatives in writing, reading, and math are implemented in their classes and integrated across disciplines. These same teachers were adept at commenting on their observations of improvements in student work through the integration projects.

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

Yes. The Review Panel highly recommends the Franklin County Technical School for designation as a Commonwealth Compass School.

**CONCLUSION**

The school's fidelity to its mission combined with a culture that seeks and nurtures collaboration, trust and respect is a valid and valuable support for the many improvement initiatives at FCTS. The Panel saw documented evidence of improvement efforts and observed the implementation of key initiatives in their classroom visits. Both the physical plant and the educational environment of the school make it a strong candidate for Compass School service.

**Appendix A  
Panel Members**

**James Neary**, Chair, Department of Education  
**Richard Cunningham**, Assistant Superintendent, Chicopee Public Schools  
**Gerald Paist**, Superintendent, Pathfinder Vocational Technical School  
**Gary Rivers**, Assistant Principal, C. H. McCann Technical School

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**CANDIDATE COMPASS SCHOOL PANEL REVIEW VISIT SCHEDULE**

**All activities take place at the school.**

7:15—8:00 a.m. Panel meets to prepare for day

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

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

Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D Chair
Student Focus Group	Parent Focus Group	Focus Group TBD	School Council Focus Group

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

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

11 a.m.—12:30 p.m. Panelists meet to discuss findings so far and to plan the remainder of the day (working lunch)

12:30—1:00 p.m. Panelists use time as needed to analyze findings and to gather more information; including follow-up questions for the principal or other staff members.

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

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

2:15—2:30 p.m. **Chair** meets briefly with principal for exit meeting to outline next steps  
**Panelists** organize and collate notes from focus groups

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

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

Taken together, the observations, individual teacher interviews, and teacher focus groups will provide a comprehensive view of the staff's understanding of, and participation and investment in, the programs and strategies to improve student performance that could be shared by the school, if designated.

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