

Panel Report
Candidate Compass School Review
William H. Taylor School
New Bedford Public Schools

INTRODUCTION

The Program

The Commonwealth Compass Schools Program is one part of the Massachusetts School and District Accountability System. The Compass Schools Program recognizes and celebrates improvement in Massachusetts' public schools, and to 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.

In this Mid-Cycle III year, sixty schools from among the top thirty most improved schools in mathematics in 2003, the thirty most improved schools below state targets in one or both (ELA and mathematics) that made AYP for all reported subgroups in 2003, and/or from among the strong semi-finalist applications from last year were invited to participate. Twenty-eight of the schools chose to apply by submitting completed applications that included written responses to three questions on the initiatives undertaken to improve student performance at the school in the past three or four years. School leaders and staff were asked to focus on those programs and practices that they think have had the most positive impact on their students' performance. Four high schools, five elementary schools, and one kindergarten through eighth grade school were selected as finalists. Ten finalist candidate 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 review process of these schools will be published in a report this fall.

The Commissioner will designate up to ten schools to serve as 2004 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 activities.

The Report

This report summarizes the findings and analyses of a small team of education professionals during a one-day visit to the William H. Taylor School on June 2, 2004. The report will assist the Commissioner in determining which schools from among those visited will be designated to serve as 2004 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:

Taylor School
New Bedford Public Schools

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 William H. Taylor School is one of 28 schools in New Bedford and one of 23 elementary schools. The school has a school-wide Title I program that serves 277 students in grades K through 5. Enrollment has averaged 260 over the past four years. Eighty-five percent of the students are White, 6% are Black and 1% Asian. Fifty-three percent of the students receive free and reduced lunch (FRL), and English is not the first language (FLNE) for 20% of the students currently enrolled. Nine percent of the students are currently on Individual Education Plans; this is well below the district average of 18%.

The daily attendance rate 95.6% in 2003 is well above the district average of 91.3 and above the state rate of 93.9% for the same grades, with an average number of days absent at 7.6% last year, about half the district average.

Staffing

The school administration includes one principal, who has been in the position for six years. There are also a school nurse, a guidance counselor, and a speech therapist on staff.

Of the sixteen teachers, six have been in the building from one to three years; one has been in the building five years; and ten have been teaching at the Taylor from twelve to thirty-six years. All of the teachers are certified to teach Elementary Education and nine hold Masters degrees.

The 2003 Mid-Cycle III AYP Report shows a notable increase of 22 points on the CPI for the Taylor School over its Cycle II performance. The CPI for 2003 of 76.3 places the school just above the 75.6 State NCLB Performance Target for mathematics for the end of this cycle. In English language arts, the CPI of 86 at mid-cycle represents a more modest CPI increase of 6.4 points, which nevertheless places the school just above the State Target for Cycle V (2007 & 08).

In ELA at the 3rd grade, the increase in the rate of all students scoring in Proficient has increased from 52% to 64% since 2001; 73% of regular education students were Proficient in 2003. At the 4th grade, the Warning rate for all students was 13% in 2000, matching the state average and already much lower than the district average. By 2003, the Warning rate for 4th grade ELA had dropped to zero, compared to the district's 25% and the state average of 7%. Fifty-one percent of the 4th graders scored in Proficient in 2001, a dramatic increase from the 3% of all students tested who scored Proficient in 2000.

After three years of Warning rates in the high twenties in 4th grade mathematics beginning in 2000, the school showed a dramatic drop in the Warning rate to 3% in 2003. Over that same period, the rate of all students scoring in Proficient increased from 19% to 36%. These results place the school 8th among the most improved in mathematics in schools that met AYP in Cycle II and at Mid-Cycle III.

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 William H. Taylor Elementary School is using effective improvement initiatives that could be replicated in other similarly profiled schools.

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

All of the significant initiatives with the greatest impact on student performance have been driven by the use of student performance data:

Initiative #1: Student performance data is collected and analyzed by administration and staff and is the driving force for all professional development decisions at the school level. Evidence of this comes in many forms.

Evidence:

Taylor School
New Bedford Public Schools

1. Goals and objectives identified in the School Improvement Plan are based on an analysis of student achievement data. For example, one goal is “Increase the percentage of students scoring in the high needs improvement category by 7% by focusing on number sense skills.”
2. Professional development decisions are driven by the analysis of student performance data. An example of this is seen in the implementation of focused instructional strategies in response to data that identified ‘open response’ writing as a weakness in ELA. In order to strengthen this area, the literacy coach provided a workshop on answering ORQs to the entire faculty. Grade level teams then met to decide how they would implement the strategies learned at their grade level. The literacy coach did some modeling for teachers at each grade level. Grade-level teams subsequently looked at and discussed student work and made decisions as to where to go next.

Initiative #2: The staff has adopted and implemented a Balanced Literacy Model. This initiative began at the district level and was driven by the fact that district MCAS scores indicated the need for staff to understand best practice. All staff members from the William H. Taylor School attended these district workshops and, as a school community, has embraced this initiative. All grade-level teachers are now using the Balanced Literacy Model.

Evidence:

1. Teachers are able to clearly articulate what the best practices are for the teaching of literacy. They are able to sight specific examples of how they implement these strategies in their classrooms.
2. These strategies were easily observable in each of the classrooms that we visited. In a first-grade classroom the students were asked “What strategies do good readers use?” In a third-grade classroom, the teacher asked her class to predict what the new story would be about by looking at the pictures.
3. The principal encourages the implementation of these best practice strategies by allowing time for teachers to share what they have learned and what is working for them.

Initiative #3: The school has implemented a coaching model for instructional improvement as well as ongoing professional development. Two full-time coaches have been hired for the school: one for ELA and one for Mathematics. The implementation of this coaching model appears to be a promising practice that is perceived by the stakeholders in this setting to be key to their instructional success and the continuous improvement of programs.

Evidence: Teachers cite the extraordinary support they receive from the coaches. The role of coaches is to provide training as needed, in-classroom demonstration lessons, and observations with coaching and support. Coaches conduct periodic benchmarking assessments; the results of which are shared with the faculty. From the identification of areas of weakness or lack of strong progress, teaching strategies are developed for focused implementation. According to the Principal, the coaches lead faculty in planning strategies together, schedule demonstration lessons and even co-teach as necessary. The principal highly values this resource and maximizes

Taylor School

New Bedford Public Schools

the coaches' time in classrooms by not assigning them any non-instructional duties (cafeteria, hall, playground supervision, etc.). The principal, coaches, and teacher representatives constitute the "leadership team." The principal stated: "we talk about data and what it means. We use "Test Whiz" (computer software) to disaggregate data and set instructional targets as a faculty."

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

The Principal, coaches and staff analyzed assessment data in order to determine the areas of weakness. From this data, a series of professional development activities were put into place. All staff attended. The professional development activities were specific to their school-based needs. Teachers began to implement the strategies learned with the support of the literacy and mathematics coaches. The coaches met with staff at after school meetings and modeled lessons in their classrooms. The principal took on a true leadership role in seeing that these initiatives were implemented by clearly articulating his expectations, by allowing time for staff to meet and share their ideas and experiences, and by asking staff to report out on their after-school meetings so that he can see progress.

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

Yes. They are excited about their model and the obvious student success it is generating. They believe that their model can be instructive to other schools that possess the sincere desire to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning and the willingness of administrators and faculty to identify and set instructional priorities along with making the necessary commitments to making it happen.

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 principal and faculty are all on the same page here. They are clear and articulate about their goals and instructional strategies for success. This is an old building (over 100 years in operation) serving an economically disadvantaged area in an urban setting. Except for special grants that the principal and leadership team might obtain, this school operates with the same funding constraints as many other urban districts in Massachusetts.

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?

Yes. It is clear that there exists a shared vision for this school and strong commitment to student success through data-driven decision making. All faculty and parents interviewed were able to articulate with conviction their strategies for student success.

Taylor School
New Bedford Public Schools

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?

Articulation of data-driven programmatic changes for improved student performance at Taylor School is done with uniform clarity and passion. The sense of “team” and mutual respect among all stakeholders is remarkable. The principal is a model of an effective school leader and is routinely cited by faculty and parents as the key to the success of the school. He in turn expresses admiration for his outstanding faculty members: “I am so lucky to have these exceptional teachers.”

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

Yes. The principal and faculty allude to “momentum” in what they are doing. They are uniformly pleased with their results. The data focus of their efforts have been successfully “institutionalized” at the Taylor School to the point where they hardly recognize anything remarkable about their efforts: “this is just what we do here!” The initiatives are operationally structured to ensure continuous reassessment and refocus on data-identified student needs (weaknesses).

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 facility is large and there are meeting spaces available. Our visit was superbly organized and coordinated by the principal. The staff and faculty are gracious and hospitable. Students appeared on their best behavior for receiving guests. Our team believes that if the Taylor School is identified as a Compass site, the principal and faculty would have the capacity to prepare appropriate information-sharing materials and presentations for effectively sharing their model with other schools.

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

Yes. This is a school that has and continues to cope with many of the same demographic and financial challenges as other Massachusetts schools. The difference is in how they have designed and implemented a student-centered program that gets results. The major elements of their model can be replicated. One comes away from the Taylor School impressed by how much is done without extraordinary resources. Much of the key to success here is organizational: student-focused mission and goals, visionary leadership, a coaching model of continuous

Taylor School

New Bedford Public Schools

professional development along with shared decision making that is data driven. Much of what one reads in the literature of effective schools is observable in action here.

CONCLUSION

Overall, it is the judgment of this panel that the William H. Taylor School would make an excellent Compass School model site for the improvement of student performance outcomes. The school has developed an organizational model that is student-centered and data-driven. All stakeholders including administration, teachers, parents and students have been drawn together with a shared vision of what this school is about, i.e., student performance. The leadership team has been established to facilitate this mission by including instructional coaches to support continuous assessment of student performance, data sharing to identify areas of need, professional development training along with in-classroom support to enable teacher success, and a climate that embraces mutual respect and accountability. Only instructional strategies that are research-based “best practices” are eligible for selection as remedial strategies for identified student performance needs. This is a model that would “make sense” to observers and it’s a model that works.

The school principal and faculty would need to do some preparation and organizing work in advance of sharing activities. Program components are all present but for efficiency of sharing the model, some additional promotional/information-sharing materials should be organized & prepared (for example, printed brochures, program summaries, graphics, etc.) The Principal and members of the leadership team have voiced a willingness to do this if the school is named a Massachusetts Compass School.