

School Panel Review Report Talbot Middle School Fall River 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. Talbot Middle School met these criteria and was one of 15 schools selected for panel review in Fall/Winter of 2004-05. The panel review was conducted on December 7-8, 2005.

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 Talbot 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.

Edmond P. Talbot Middle School Profile

Enrollment

The Edmond P. Talbot Middle School is one of five middle schools in Fall River. The school serves students in grades 6 - 8. Over the last four years, enrollment at Talbot Middle School has fluctuated slightly, from 789 in 2001 to 805 in 2003 and 753 as of October 1 this school year. Student demographics at the school have remained fairly stable over the same time, with several notable changes.

Between 2001 and 2004, the proportions of Asian and Hispanic students attending Talbot Middle School have remained at 9~10 and 7~8 percent, respectively. The percentage of Black students has increased slightly, from 6 to 8 percent, while the percentage of White students has decreased from 77 to 75 percent over the same time. In 2004, 62 percent of Talbot Middle School's students were from low-income families. This proportion is similar to previous years, with the exception of 2003, when 51 percent were reported in this category. In 2004, 9 percent of students are reported as being Limited English Proficient, which is a decrease from the 12~15 percent reported in prior years. This school year 16 percent of students are receiving special education services, which is 1 percent fewer than last year.

In 2004, Talbot Middle School registered an attendance rate of 91.7 percent, with students absent 14 days on average. The school's retention rate was 4.2 percent in 2003, the last year for which this data is available. Out-of-school suspensions were reported at 56.6 percent, more than nine times the State's 6.1 percent average. The rate of 2003 in-school suspensions was 79.3 percent, with no exclusions reported.

Staffing

The 2004-2005 Talbot Middle School School's staffing report indicates that the school is composed of 3 administrators, 68 teachers, 2 guidance counselors, 2 school adjustment counselors and access to one district school psychologist. Approximately 42 percent of educators at the school have been there for three or fewer years. More than 89 percent of the Talbot Middle School's teachers are licensed in their current teaching area.

MCAS Overview

Students at the Talbot Middle School are assessed in grade 7 in English language arts (ELA) and in grades 6 and 8 in mathematics. The school has not made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in ELA since 2002. The school has not made AYP in mathematics since AYP determinations were first issued in 1999. In the school's Cycle III End-of-Cycle Report (2003-2004), the school did not make AYP in ELA in the aggregate or for both of its two reported subgroups: Free/Reduced Price Lunch and White.¹ In mathematics, the school failed to make AYP in the aggregate and for four of its five reported subgroups: Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Free/Reduced Price Lunch, and White. The school is currently identified for Improvement in ELA and Restructuring in mathematics.

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 Price Lunch, African-American/Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native American, and White. A minimum of 40 students (or 5% of the total number of students assessed, whichever is greater) per subgroup is required to issue a statistically sound rating or determination of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The subgroups meeting the minimum sample size at Talbot Middle School in 2004 were Free/Reduced Price Lunch in ELA, and Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Free/Reduced Price Lunch, Asian or Pacific Islander, and White in mathematics.

Student Performance in English Language Arts

GRADE 7

Regular Education

Results for regular education students in grade 7 ELA were stable between 2002 and 2003, with a slight performance improvement evident in 2004. In 2002, 3 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 48 percent in the Proficient range, 42 percent in the Needs Improvement range, and 7 percent in Warning. In 2003, 1 percent were Advanced, 49 percent were Proficient, 45 percent were in Needs Improvement, and 6 percent were in Warning. In 2004, the percentage Proficient climbed to 55 percent, the percentage of students in Needs Improvement decreased to 38, and the percentage in Warning was 7 percent.

Special Education

Results for Special Education students in grade 7 ELA are similar in 2001, 2002, and 2004. Performance in 2003 was slightly higher. In 2003, 6 percent of students were Proficient, 57 percent were in Needs Improvement, and 36 percent were in Warning. In other years, the percentages in the Proficient, Needs Improvement, and Warning ranges were consistent, at 6~7 percent Proficient, 32~33 percent in Needs Improvement, and 59~61 percent in Warning. .

Limited English Proficient

The results for Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in grade 7 ELA are only available for 2003 and 2004. In 2004, 18 percent of the 17 students assessed were Proficient, 71 percent were in Needs Improvement, and 12 percent were in Warning. In 2003, 10 percent of the 30 students assessed were Proficient, 63 percent were in Needs Improvement, and 27 percent were in Warning.

Student Performance in Mathematics

GRADE 6

Regular Education

The scores of regular education students on the grade 6 mathematics tests have shown some improvement between 2001 and 2004. In 2001, 3 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 10 percent were Proficient, 30 percent were in Needs Improvement, and 58 percent scored in Warning. In 2003, 4 percent were Advanced, 16 percent scored in Proficient, 37 percent in Needs Improvement, and 43 percent in Warning. In 2004, 3 percent were Advanced, the percentage Proficient increased to 18, the percentage in Needs Improvement was 41, and the percentage in Warning decreased to 37.

Special Education

The performance of Special Education students in grade 6 mathematics has remained low between 2001 and 2004, though some gains are evident in 2004. In 2004, 2 percent of students were Proficient, 18 percent were in Needs Improvement, and 80 percent were in Warning. In the two previous years, 93~94 percent of the students assessed were in Warning.

Limited English Proficient

Data for LEP students in grade 6 mathematics are only available for 2003 and 2004. In 2003, 7 percent of the 27 students assessed were Proficient, 11 percent were in Needs Improvement, and 81 percent were in Warning. In 2004, 100 percent of the 12 students assessed were in Warning.

GRADE 8

Regular Education

Scores for regular education students in grade 8 mathematics have remained fairly stable between 2001 and 2004, with a gradual decrease in the percentage of students in the Warning category. In 2001, 1 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 6 percent in Proficient, 34 percent in Needs Improvement, and 59 percent in Warning. In 2004, 1 percent were Advanced, 13 percent were Proficient, 34 percent were in Needs Improvement, and 52 percent were in Warning.

Special Education

From 2001 to 2004, the percentage of Special Education students scoring in the Warning category in grade 8 mathematics was 93~97 percent. In 2004, 2 percent were Proficient, 5 percent scored in the Needs Improvement range; the remaining 93 percent were in Warning.

Limited English Proficient

Results for LEP students in grade 8 mathematics are available for 2000, 2003, and 2004. In 2000, 100 percent scored in the Warning range. In 2003 and 2004, 94 percent of the students assessed were in the Warning range.

PANEL RESPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS

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

Yes. Talbot Middle School is implementing a School Improvement Plan (SIP) that is likely to elicit increases in student performance. Talbot has formulated student learning objectives that are based on data analysis and instructional change objectives that are linked to student weaknesses and identified causes for performance gaps. The SIP identifies strategies that are expected to facilitate student learning as well as approaches to reduce current program gaps. The plan is clear in its written form and contains benchmarks to monitor implementation. Not only was the Talbot SIP developed through a process that supports its implementation, but it also continues to guide ongoing improvement planning at Talbot.

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

Yes. Talbot Middle School has completed a thorough analysis of student test scores to identify areas of low achievement as well as an examination of teaching practices at the school to identify causal factors for low student performance.

Through the use of Massachusetts Curriculum Assessment System (MCAS) from 2001, 2002 & 2003 as well as Terra Nova results from the 2000-2001 school year, Talbot conducted an analysis of student performance on assessment questions in both English language arts (ELA) and math, as indicated in the Leadership Report and the School Improvement Plan. The SIP contains specific documentation of this analysis across grade levels and assessment systems. For example:

- “On the 8th grade Terra Nova... 85% of students showed non-mastery on Measurement, and 57% on Patterns/Relationships/Functions. The Terra Nova scores for grade 6, 2001 and grade 7, 2002 (evidence of cohort analysis)... the greatest decline was in measurement (70%) and geometry/spatial relations (40%). This trend is reflected in the MCAS data where only 27% attained passing scores in this area” (*SIP, p.3*).

Based on the above analysis of question types where student scores were lowest, Talbot conducted an item analysis to further indicate performance gaps and begin to determine why these gaps exist. Results from this analysis further isolated the following areas of student weakness, for example (*SIP, p.3*):

- “(Lack of) knowledge and understanding of basic computation”
- “Difficulty in the use of (mathematical) formulas especially when contained in reference material”
- “Little application of test taking strategies”

Besides examining areas of student weakness, Talbot conducted a review of instructional practices and curriculum implementation to identify factors that may also be influential in the school’s low performance rates. Results of this review suggest several classroom-based practices in need of attention in mathematics. The School Improvement Plan, Leadership Report, as well as interviews with the principal, the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) team and some teaching staff indicated that inconsistent implementation of the *Connected Mathematics Program (CMP)* has affected student performance, as spiraling techniques inherent to the curriculum were not being used to effectively address learning gaps. These inconsistencies were primarily attributed to incomplete *CMP* training and limited opportunities to collaborate on strategies learned in professional development to advance the effectiveness of instructional practices. Similar analyses were also conducted in ELA, where Talbot identified inconsistent implementation of a writing curriculum, an insufficient number of licensed reading teachers and limited supplemental resources as factors contributing to low student performance in identified content areas and skills sets (*SIP, Leadership Report*).

As a result of analyses of student achievement data as well as gaps in instructional programs at the school, the Talbot School Improvement Plan identifies why performance gaps exist, which link teaching with learning. These causal factors are identified in both math and ELA respectively, for example:

- “The CMP curriculum assumes that students have the necessary skills and prior knowledge to be successful in the grade level units, but often this is not the case because spiraling has not been effectively used” (*SIP, p. 5*).
- “Insufficient number of licensed reading teachers available to meet the needs of the student population” (*SIP, p. 17*).

Although not identified in the School Improvement Plan, Talbot has recognized two additional variables - low attendance rates and high suspension rates - that have influenced achievement at the school. Attendance rates at Talbot have been below the state requirement of 92 percent since 2001, with the highest rate of 91.7 percent occurring in 2004. Although Talbot met the improvement target (based on change in the Composite Performance Index (CPI)) for the aggregate population in both ELA and math in Cycle III, low attendance rates precluded the school from achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). On the Department of Education (DOE) instructional survey, 18 percent of staff responding (n=67) suggested low attendance was a primary cause of low student achievement at the school. Interviews with district administrators, the principal, PIM (Performance Improvement Mapping) Team as well as focus groups with staff members indicate an increased emphasis on improving attendance rates this year that has been successful. The school reports higher attendance rates for the first three months of the 2004-2005 school year, averaging 94 percent.

Talbot has reported high suspension rates, both in-school and out-of-school, which have been identified as factors influencing student performance, as suspension prohibits full access to curriculum and instruction. School leadership cited safety issues relating to gang activity in the school, an approach to discipline that is working to create a better school environment, and their zero tolerance for unacceptable behavior last year as causal factors for high suspension rates. “We came down hard (last year),” said one vice principal. School administrators provided data that shows a decrease in both in-school and out-of-school suspensions this fall as compared to 2003, as evidenced in the table below.

Comparisons of School Suspensions (in total number) in the Fall 2003 vs. Fall 2004

<i>Month</i>	<i>Total number of In-School Suspensions</i>		<i>Total number of Out-of- School Suspensions</i>	
	<i>Fall 2003</i>	<i>Fall 2004</i>	<i>Fall 2003</i>	<i>Fall 2004</i>
<i>September</i>	64	26	27	3
<i>October</i>	126	45	64	21
<i>November</i>	87	81	42	31

Talbot Middle School has completed an analysis of student achievement results, curriculum implementation and elements of the school’s program to identify gaps in student performance. Although data for subgroup populations is missing from the plan (and will be discussed later in this report), the current analysis is thorough enough to determine causes for persistent gaps for all students and as a result, sets a foundation for the implementation of student learning and instructional change objectives that target the identified weaknesses at the school.

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

Yes. Based on the areas of identified weakness resulting from the school's data analysis, Talbot has specified clear student learning and instructional change objectives that are reasonable, measurable, and focus on teaching and learning.

The Talbot School Improvement Plan contains a series of prioritized Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) that are based on an analysis of student weaknesses in both math (5 SLOs) and ELA (4 SLOs). For example:

- **Math SLO 1.2:** All students will demonstrate a working knowledge and understanding of basic computation and be able to apply those skills (*SIP, p. 4*).
- **ELA SLO 1.1:** All students will acquire and use MCAS and content specific vocabulary to increase reading comprehension and written language skills (*SIP, p. 17*).

For each SLO, the Talbot SIP also contains benchmarks that identify the assessment tool, assessment dates and desired level/s of performance to measure student learning across objectives (*see SIP, p. 22*).

Instructional Change Objectives (ICOs) in the SIP focus on teaching strategies and/or curriculum adaptations that are specifically related to student learning objectives as well as the identified causes for performance gaps at the school. For example:

- **Math ICO 1.2:** Math teachers will assess and remediate specific gaps in students understanding of basic number sense and computational skills (SLO 1.2) (*SIP, p. 4*).
- **ELA ICO 1.2:** All teachers in their content areas will engage students in use of vocabulary notebooks to learn and apply new vocabulary (SLO 1.1) (*SIP, p. 17*).

The SIP also contains benchmarks to monitor and assess the implementation and effectiveness of instructional change objectives. ICO benchmarks include a method of collecting information, evidence of quality implementation and timelines across objectives (*see SIP, p. 7*).

Much less well-developed are the current SIP goals to address the low performance rates of special education students at Talbot Middle School. Interviews with the district administration indicated that special education goals have not yet been addressed according to the plan's timeline and those goals are a focus for this year. This was corroborated by interviews with the principal and school faculty who indicated the special education program is in its initial phases of implementation as a full inclusion model and a thorough analysis of student needs and program gaps has not been completed. The SIP contains only one compound student performance goal for students with special needs, which is to "decrease Warning rates in math and ELA for students from grades 6-8 with special needs" (*SIP, p. 28*). Rather than specify SLOs and ICOs for special education students, the plan instead outlines strategies to form a special education planning team and to provide training on differentiated instruction to regular education teachers and *CMP* training to special education teachers. This planning process is articulated in the SIP as "inquiry" objectives. For example:

- ***Inquiry objective 2.3:*** Evaluate the decision-making process by which students are placed in inclusive or self-contained SPED settings (*SIP, p. 29*).

As currently stated, the objectives in the SIP for special education students do not specifically address teaching and learning and, as a result, are not likely to influence student achievement for this subgroup. However, it is the judgment of the panel that these identified inquiry objectives are reasonable steps and are likely to provide a foundation to assist in the further establishment of the special education inclusion program.

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

Yes. The Talbot SIP contains specific strategies that are linked to student learning and instructional change objectives. The SIP also includes an Action Plan that identifies variables needed to ensure that the strategies are successfully implemented. Beyond the strategies listed in the current School Improvement Plan, significant changes to scheduling and use of the facility have been made by the new principal to better accommodate improvement efforts.

The Talbot SIP contains a series of strategies that are linked to the instructional change objectives as well as the causes for low student achievement at the school. Further, the SIP sets forth an Action Plan for accomplishing each of the identified strategies, both in math and ELA. Below is an example of one math strategy and its corresponding Action Plan, which is linked to ***Math ICO 1.2***, seen in the response to the previous question (1B):

- ***Strategy:*** Incorporate “Daily Reviews” based on results of pre-tests (*SIP, p. 4*).
- ***Action Plan*** (*SIP, p. 12*):
 - ***Who is Responsible:*** Math teachers
 - ***Resources Needed:*** Assessment of basic skills pretest and unit pretest
 - ***Timelines:*** Daily
 - ***Measurement of Implementation:*** Lesson Plan Books will reflect use of daily reviews

Beyond strategies documented in the School Improvement Plan, which link teaching to student learning and are based on a causal analysis of performance gaps, Talbot has implemented a number of additional, organizational strategies to further support improvement initiatives. In January, 2004, the school day shifted from a five day schedule to a seven day rotating schedule to incorporate increased common planning time for instructional staff, as reported by the principal and staff during interviews. Additional school-wide restructuring occurred at the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year that included the movement of classrooms to vary grade-level representation on each floor and to place teachers in a team close together. These changes were based on the leadership’s assessment of what needed to occur to ameliorate discipline issues and build teamwork. “We moved almost 30 classes... we need to set ourselves up to project forward as houses,” stated the principal. Interviews with district administrators, the principal, and some instructional staff also indicated that this restructuring occurred in part to address the school’s evolution into a full inclusion (for special education students) model, which is in its initial phases of implementation. Evidence that school-wide communication is occurring to support teaching and learning are seen in the results from the DOE instructional survey. Of

those responding (n=77), 84 percent of Talbot staff members met at least once a week to plan lessons with other teachers, 85 percent to discuss student work, and 83 percent to discuss strategies and services for individual students.

Talbot has also established additional academic programming initiatives at the school. As indicated in the Leadership Report and in interviews with school staff, the Talbot Learning Center (TLC) program has been expanded this year to all grade levels, through the use of the Strategies classes. The expansion of the TLC program is identified in the SIP as a strategy to remediate learning gaps in mathematics. Interviews with special education staff also suggested the Strategies classes are used to address the additional learning needs of special education students. Talbot recently began the Count Up initiative for 15 minutes daily to review basic math skills, an area of student weakness identified in the SIP. In interviews and focus groups, teachers confirmed use of the Count Up program and were also able to cite this initiative as a strategy to improve student performance in math. A shift in the school day schedule has also occurred, with each day beginning with an academic class and ending in homeroom, where agenda books are checked (Leadership Report, principal and staff interviews). Interviews with teachers further suggested that this new schedule has helped to reduce the number of students who are tardy.

As indicated in the school's analysis of program gaps, low attendance rates and high suspension rates were also of concern to the Talbot community. Talbot has implemented strategies to address attendance rates, which include several incentive programs at the school level (principal and staff interviews) and the presence of an attendance officer who checks in daily (district interview). To address high suspension rates, Talbot has increased police and court presence and continued efforts to bring parents in to discuss disciplinary issues (principal/vice principal interview). The administration also reports efforts to move the most disruptive students to an alternative setting in the district. Data on attendance and suspension rates suggest these changes have made a positive impact on the school. In interviews, faculty members additionally credited the shift in climate at the school as integral to the increase in student attendance and decrease in suspension rates seen at the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year (see Question 1A). One teacher stated that students come to school now because it is "a safe, happy home, where they can take chances and not be afraid."

It is the judgment of the Panel that the Talbot SIP contains sufficient strategies to address areas of student weakness and instructional gaps and that if implementation continues the school is likely to see reductions in the performance gaps at the school. However, it is noteworthy that the plan currently does not sufficiently address the learning needs of two key subgroups at the school: Special education students and English language learners (ELL). While the SIP contains a goal to address special education students, it is still in an "inquiry" phase and as a result, does not identify specific strategies to fully address the learning needs of this population or related teaching practices. Furthermore, Talbot is the only middle school in the district that houses a program for ELL students. There is not currently a specific curriculum in place for ELL learners (interviews with ELL staff), nor does the SIP possess objectives or instructional strategies to address the specialized learning needs of this population.

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

Yes. The clarity and specificity of the Talbot School Improvement Plan has been well documented in this report. In its written form, the SIP contains strategies to address student learning and instructional change objectives that are the output of a thorough analysis of why performance gaps exist at the school. The SIP is utilized and by staff members school-wide.

Nearly every member of the Talbot community cited the vital role the School Improvement Plan plays in the instructional planning and the implementation of classroom practices (interviews and focus groups). Furthermore, staff members and school leadership cite the SIP as critical to increasing student achievement and incorporating other improvement initiatives at Talbot. In an interview with the Talbot PIM team, one teacher stated, "If you walk down the hall, people will have this (the SIP) attached to them." Results from the DOE instructional survey corroborate these reports, as 85 percent of staff responding (n=77) either "Strongly Agreed" or "Agreed" that that the "school has a well-defined plan for reaching student performance goals" and 77% either "Strongly Agreed" or "Agreed" that they are "well informed about the initiatives that are undertaken by school leadership to improve student performance."

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

Yes. The current School Improvement Plan appears to have become a living document that not only guides the implementation and review of current efforts, but also acts as a foundation for ongoing planning and the development of future improvement initiatives at Talbot Middle School.

The process for improvement planning at Talbot was reorganized at the start of this school year to evaluate the effectiveness of the current 2003-2005 SIP and to begin preparation for the development and implementation of the new plan, which will guide the school's practices for the next three years. Three groups, which contain representative personnel across grade levels, disciplines and years of experience, have primary involvement in this process: The Leadership Team (disseminates information about the SIP planning process for discussion); Team Leaders (gather information based on classroom-level analysis of instruction and student achievement); and the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) Team (analyze data, amend and re-write the SIP). The description of this process as well as definitions of roles and responsibilities were consistent across interviews with the PIM team, Leadership Team, the School Council, principal and instructional staff, and are also corroborated by the Leadership Report.

To ensure that initiatives in the SIP are being implemented and to further measure implementation progress, Talbot conducts a school-wide "Self Study Survey" based on the plan's instructional change objectives. The Leadership Report and the SIP identify this tool as a measurement device and interviews with numerous instructional staff members cited the survey as a means for monitoring the effective implementation of classroom practices.

The presence of an ongoing process for improvement planning that is rooted in the school's identification of weaknesses is apparent at Talbot. The principal cited a lack of data collection as a primary weakness at the school, "We need to work on data collection. We're doing it (implementing programs) but we're not documenting." The PIM team suggested that the school is "just beginning to look at data in an ongoing way – We're learning about it." Focus groups and interviews with teaching staff suggested that rubrics and checklists were currently being developed throughout the school and within their teams so they could better monitor student work and document achievement at the classroom level. As further evidence of the school's continued commitment to the implementation of the improvement initiatives as well as defining a new SIP to meet the changing needs of the Talbot community, the panel was presented with a "SIP calendar 2004-2005" that updates methods for collecting benchmark data consistent with the school's current efforts. For example:

- **ELA ICO 1.4:** Student portfolios will show evidence of rubric usage, as well as multiple revisions in which improvement is evident

Professional development (PD) opportunities planned at Talbot Middle School are consistent with the improvement initiatives, though PD is not in full alignment with the School Improvement Plan. The district provides PD in Balanced Literacy as well as bi-weekly *CMP* trainings for new teachers as dictated by the pacing guide. The Leadership Report and interviews with the principal cited the school's focus for PD this year includes differentiated instruction and Research for Better Teaching (RBT) training in the Skillful Teacher model, in efforts to continue to build a unified school-wide effort to adhere to standard-based lesson planning and instructional practices. This approach is unique to Fall River and stems from the principal's initiative. When asked about PD in interviews and focus groups, teachers confirmed participation in each of the above initiatives as well as an extensive list of additional trainings they had voluntarily completed on their own time.

Not only has the implementation of the School Improvement Plan at Talbot Middle School occurred through a collaborative process, individuals school-wide can identify the importance of their own role in the execution of these improvement efforts. Assuming that the ongoing development and application of the SIP continues, it is the judgment of the panel that the process currently in place is likely to continue to support the plan's implementation.

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

Yes, with some qualifications. A strong and unified vision exists at Talbot Middle School to support improvement plans. This is evident in the commitment of faculty to the initiatives and their efforts to go above and beyond what the SIP calls for. School leadership has applied the appropriate supports to begin to instill a school-wide belief that focuses on teaching and learning. A community exists at Talbot that is dedicated to reducing performance gaps and, as a result, the school has established an environment that is currently supporting the successful implementation of improvement plans. However, support and guidance at the district level is less clear and/or inconsistent. As a result, a large burden of improvement planning and organization currently

resides at the school level. It is the judgment of the Panel that because the school-based factors are a considerable strength, they outweigh the current inadequacies at the district-level.

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

Yes. In 15 months at Talbot Middle School, the principal has established a unified vision that a sound education is rooted in accountability practices for all parties involved. Leadership, faculty and students alike - are responsible for the success of the school's programs. The principal has implemented structural and programmatic changes at the school that are consistent with this vision and these changes have been well received by the Talbot community.

Support for the leadership at Talbot is widespread. Results from the DOE instructional survey indicate 91 percent of staff responding (n=77) either "Strongly Agreed" or "Agreed" that the "the principal provides effective leadership to guide and support staff efforts to improve academic performance of our students." This support was corroborated in an interview with the superintendent, "She has done a terrific job. She makes things happen." The leadership at Talbot exemplifies team-oriented practices with an emphasis on communication. The principal and vice principals meet regularly and vice principals attend team meetings on a regular basis. As stated in the Leadership Report, "We are highly visible throughout the day and accessible to teachers, students and parents." When asked in focus groups how often their classrooms were visited by school administration, teachers indicated on average, three to four times per week. Interviews with Talbot staff resoundingly praised the school's leadership. "Leadership is strong and clear cut, but also open to changes." "(Leadership) is outstanding. Supportive." As a result, a consistent vision and expectation for student performance and instructional practices have been established at the school.

The restructuring of the school schedule and movement of classrooms (see Question 1C), as well as school-based professional development efforts (see Question 1E), were leadership level initiatives to support improvement efforts at the school. The principal established team leaders this year, through use of grant funding, to supply a sound communication link between school-wide staff and the leadership structure. Further, the principal hired 19 new staff members this year, reducing the number of faculty that are not certified and removing teachers who did not adhere to the school's new vision (principal and teacher interviews). Special education and teachers of English language learners were required to receive training in the *CMP* curriculum this year.

Reports of the significant cultural shift that has occurred at Talbot in the last year were widespread across interviews and focus groups conducted by the panel. For example, the school has adopted four motivational phrases that drive everyone's work. These four phrases: "This is important;" "You can do it;" "I won't give up on you;" and "Effort makes a difference" have been painted on the walls of every classroom in the school. These phrases have instilled a strong message throughout the entire school community. As one teacher stated, "The other day, one of my students said to me, 'I won't give up on you!'" Teachers were also required to post daily agendas and isolate a space for consistent homework postings, all of which were evident during classroom observations.

As one teacher stated, “The leadership has vision. The disconnect has vanished.” Though the principal has set the impetus for how the school will function, this vision runs throughout Talbot Middle School and as a result, has created an environment that is likely to support the planned improvement initiatives.

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

Yes. Evidence throughout this report indicates the commitment of Talbot faculty to the planned improvement initiatives. Not only does the faculty utilize the School Improvement Plan as a guiding document, but teachers also realize that improvement planning is an ongoing process. Talbot faculty and staff have adopted the leadership’s vision and have implemented many efforts to establish a school-wide system that focuses on standards-based teaching and learning.

Classroom observation indicated school-wide use of strategies listed in the SIP including references to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, word walls, daily agendas, posted student work and the four motivational phrases painted on the walls. Interviews with instructional staff indicated the Count Up initiative was being implemented daily and use of portfolios to monitor student achievement were being kept across grade levels and disciplines, and even include student work from IMPACT subjects.

Instructional practices varied throughout the school. Whole-group instruction with an additional staff member supplying one-on-one individualized support was seen during some classroom observations, while others exemplified a co-teaching model, an initiative the school is working toward to accommodate the full inclusion model that is evolving at Talbot. Though not all exemplary, all lessons observed by the panel were judged to be of sound educational practice. Some efforts to employ differentiated instructional practice existed, consistent with the school’s current professional development efforts.

Interviews with Talbot faculty confirmed the occurrence of team level meetings and further cited that structural changes at the school have increased communication and collaborative efforts. “Working with a team leader is a positive,” stated one teacher.

The implementation of the School Improvement Plan and associated efforts have established a sense of accountability and a spirit of community at Talbot Middle School that is evident in the faculty’s adherence to the improvement initiatives and the commitment to a common vision.

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

No. On a positive note, the district has supplied Talbot with some additional staffing and Title I support. Though the Panel recognizes that this might exhaust the district’s financial means, from a purely educational perspective, current levels of district support and guidance are not specific to the needs of Talbot Middle School. The large burden of continued improvement planning and restructuring efforts reside primarily with the school. The Panel came to this conclusion based on three major deficiencies: Continued inconsistencies and oversight of the math curriculum (including the currently vacant math coach position; the need for a more specific plan for the roll-out of the special education inclusion program; and the lack of a clear curriculum and

professional development to support the instruction of English language learners, as Talbot is the district-wide center for this population.

The effective implementation of the *Connected Mathematics Program (CMP)* has presented ongoing difficulty at Talbot Middle School, as identified in the School Improvement Plan. Though the district is supplying Professional Development trainings in *CMP*, the district and school do not share a common vision for how best to implement the curriculum. The panel heard reports from staff that suggested *CMP* was not being implemented in the sequence dictated by the curriculum. The DOE instructional survey corroborated these reports. Several teachers suggested that inconsistent implementation of curriculum was one of the most significant causes of low student performance at the school. For example:

- “There are big gaps in our *CMP* math program... the books are being taught out of the suggested order of the program.”
- “The improper implementation of the *CMP* math program has resulted in gaps that greatly impede the progress of students.
- “The *CMP* program that we use is not being used as it was designed because the curriculum coordinator has her own schedule to present the material that she insists on following.”

The principal suggested the staff “strongly believes they need to be able to order the pacing and do the books at the right level... putting the books in order.” When the panel asked the math curriculum coordinator about these inconsistencies, she confirmed that some things were being taught out of order to try to compensate for skill gaps they identified in incoming sixth graders. The district math curriculum in grades 1-6 is not fully aligned with *CMP* used at the middle school level. Though Talbot has begun to implement some remediation strategies, (for example, Count-Up initiative, Strategies classes) a specific plan for how remediation of math skills can be incorporated into the district’s pacing guide is unclear. Though it is beyond the scope of the Panel to judge what implementation approach makes the most sense for the Talbot, the ongoing confusion and apparent lack of communication to resolve issues was judged to be counterproductive.

The district has funded a math coach position to oversee and monitor the implementation of the curriculum and support instructional staff by modeling strategies that are consistent with best practice. This is also a strategy listed in the SIP to assist in the implementation of instructional change objectives. At present, the school is without a math coach or the support of math consultants utilized by the school in the 2003-2004 year (school-wide interviews, Leadership Report). Both the principal and district administrators indicate ongoing advertisements have occurred to fill the math coach position, but recruitment has been difficult. No stop-gap measure, such as hiring a consultant with the same funds, has been put in place. The lack of a math coach was of concern to the Panel given the ongoing issues surrounding *CMP* implementation.

The performance of special education students has been persistently low at Talbot. The school is in its initial phases of evolving into a full-inclusion model to better address the needs of special education students. Currently, the district does not have a comprehensive plan in place for the roll out of this model though it is perceived as a district-wide initiative (district and

principal interviews). The current School Improvement Plan does not contain specific objectives or strategies to address the special education population, which was further evidenced by the varied use of instructional models seen during classroom observations. While the district has offered some outside consultation as well as a volunteer training in co-teaching this summer, it is the judgment of the panel that this is not sufficient for a complete roll-out of the inclusion model.

Talbot Middle School houses the district-wide program for English language learners who are bused from across the district to participate in this program. However, the SIP, which was approved by the district, does not contain any analysis of performance data for this subgroup, nor any objectives or strategies to specifically address the specialized learning needs of this population. Interviews with ELL instructional staff suggested they “are starting to develop a specific ELL curriculum,” but the components of this curriculum as well as its systematic use were unclear to the panel. District leadership does not consist of a full-time coordinator to support the ELL program nor have mandatory professional development opportunities been provided to Talbot to address this group of learners (interview with ELL staff and principal). This is again indicative of inadequate district guidance and support to fully address the specific improvement needs of the Talbot Middle School population.

The district does appear to be informed as to at least some of the school’s needs. In an interview, District administration indicated an awareness of the low attendance rates at Talbot and noted concern about the low performance of special education students, both consistent with performance gaps identified by the school. The principal commended the support of the Title I, specifically in helping the school to acquire needed technology and acknowledged support of the District in the allocation of additional teaching staff, though the school was not fully staffed (Leadership Report and interview). However, the panel could not conclude that this is sufficient to address the necessary performance gaps that have persisted at Talbot.

The district also has a process in place for supporting and reviewing the School Improvement Plan, which has least in part contributed to the soundness of the Talbot SIP. The district supplied personnel to train the Talbot PIM team and additionally, the School Support Specialist provided guidance to assist the PIM team during the construction of the SIP. As indicated in the Leadership Report, the school support specialist was “instrumental in revising the plan that was written and subsequently approved.” However, the school support specialist has taken on the position of Title I director for the district.

It is the judgment of the panel that the current district guidance and support is not sufficient to guide the improvement efforts at Talbot Middle School. While the panel recognizes that the district may not have all the necessary financial resources to increase support, it is the judgment of the Panel that the conditions that are currently in place to foster increased student performance at Talbot are overly dependent on efforts at the school level.

CONCLUSION

Talbot Middle School is implementing a School Improvement Plan as well as additional improvement efforts that are rooted in the school’s analysis of performance gaps. This is an ongoing process at Talbot that continues to consider the changing requirements of the student

population as well as the instructional needs of staff. Though district guidance is not fully sufficient, the school's leadership has a coherent vision to oversee the improvement efforts that are in place at the school and Talbot staff members are equally committed to increasing student achievement rates. It is the judgment of the Panel that if the current implementation of improvement initiatives continues, Talbot Middle School is likely to see a reduction in student performance gaps.

**APPENDIX A
Team Members**

Ledyard McFadden, Panel Chair, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

Megan Tupa, Panel Co-Chair, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

Dr. Denise Delorey, Panel Coordinator, MA Department of Education, Malden, MA

James Deveny, Panel Member, Principal, McGlynn School, Medford Public Schools, Medford, MA

David Fox-Melanson, Panel Member, Retired Superintendent, Carlisle Public Schools, Carlisle, MA

Kathleen Montagano, Panel Member, Principal, Nichols Middle School, Middleborough Public Schools, Middleborough, MA

Tony Teso, Panel Member, Principal & Director of Student Services, Veterans' Memorial Elementary School, Provincetown, MA

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

- 9:00 – 9:30 a.m.* 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]
- 9:30 – 11:30 a.m.* **Team meeting # 1:** team meets for the first time to discuss each panelist’s individual analysis; team forms preliminary judgments on key questions. [location: hotel]
- 12:00—2:00 p.m.* Panelists meet with Principal (and one other school-based individual, if appropriate). [location: the school]
- 2:00 – 3:00 p.m.* Panelists meet with School Leadership Team
- 3:00 – 4:00 p.m.* Panelists meet with the district Superintendent (and Assistant Superintendent, if appropriate). [location: school]
- 4:30 – 6:00 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.

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