

## **School Panel Review Report Normandin Middle School New Bedford Public Schools**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the School Panel Review Process is to assist the Commissioner of Education in determining whether State intervention is needed to guide improvement efforts in schools where students' MCAS performance is not at a level that reaches the school's Adequate Yearly Progress targets in English language arts or mathematics or both. The Normandin Middle School met this 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 and 8, 2004.

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

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

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

The panel's findings and conclusions on the two key questions will be forwarded to the Commissioner of Education for consideration, together with school performance data, in determining whether Normandin 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.

### **Normandin Middle School Profile**

The Normandin Middle School is one of three middle schools in New Bedford. At the beginning of the 2003-2004 school year, the school expanded its population by adding grade 6. The school now serves students in grades 6-8. Accordingly, enrollment at Normandin Middle School has increased from 880 in 2001 to 907 in 2003 and 1,334 as of October 1 this school year. Student demographics at the school have remained fairly stable over the same time, with several small, but notable, changes.

Between 2001 and 2004, the proportions of Asian and Black students attending Normandin Middle School have remained at 0 - 1 and 8 - 9 percent, respectively. The percentage of Hispanic students has increased from 13 to 16 percent, while the percentage of White students has decreased from 79 to 75 percent over the same period. In 2004, 60 percent of Normandin Middle School's students were from low income families. This proportion is similar to previous years, with the exception of 2002, when 54 percent were reported in this category. In 2004, 18 percent of students are reported as having a first language other than English, which is a slight decrease from the 20 percent reported in 2003. No students were reported in the Limited English Proficient category between 2002 and 2004. This school year, 16 percent of students are receiving special education services, which is the same percentage as in 2003.

In 2004, Normandin Middle School registered an attendance rate of 93.5 percent, with students absent 11.3 days on average. The school's retention rate was 4.1 percent in 2003, the last year for which these data are available. Out-of-school suspensions were reported at 13.2 percent, more than twice the State's 6.1 percent average. No in-school suspensions or exclusions were reported in 2003; though in 2002, the in-school suspension rate was 24.2 percent.

### **Staffing**

The 2004-2005 Normandin Middle School School's staffing report indicates that the school is composed of 4 administrators, 102 teachers and 4 guidance staff. Approximately 58 percent of educators at the school have been there for three or fewer years. More than 88 percent of the Normandin Middle School's teachers are licensed in their current teaching area.

### **MCAS Results**

Students at the Normandin 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 AYP Report (2003-2004), the school did not make AYP in ELA in the aggregate or for two of its four reported subgroups: Special Education and White<sup>1</sup>. In mathematics, the school failed to make AYP in the aggregate and for all of its five reported subgroups: Special Education, Free/Reduced Price Lunch, African-American/Black, Hispanic and White. The school is currently identified for Improvement in ELA and Restructuring in mathematics.

## **Student Performance in English Language Arts**

### **GRADE 7**

#### **Regular Education**

Results for regular education students in grade 7 ELA show a slight performance improvement trend between 2001 and 2004. In 2001, 1 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 31 percent in the Proficient range, 47 percent in the Needs Improvement range and 20 percent in Warning. In 2003, 1 percent were Advanced, 36 percent were Proficient, 51 percent were in Needs Improvement and 11 percent were in Warning. In 2004, the percentage Proficient climbed

to 40 percent, the percentage of students in Needs Improvement decreased to 48 and the percentage in Warning was 12 percent.

### **Special Education**

Results for Special Education students in grade 7 ELA show improvement from 2001 to 2002, since 2002 results show a slight performance decline. In 2001, 1 percent of students were Proficient, 9 percent were in Needs Improvement and 89 percent were in the Warning range. In 2002, 8 percent of students were Proficient, 52 percent were in Needs Improvement and 41 percent were in Warning. In 2004, 10 percent were Proficient, 44 percent were in Needs Improvement and 46 percent were in the Warning range.

### **Limited English Proficient**

Fewer than 10 Limited English Proficient (LEP) students were assessed in the grade 7 ELA tests; as such, no aggregated results are reported for this subgroup.

## **Student Performance in Mathematics**

### **GRADE 6**

#### **Regular Education**

As a result of the school's grade expansion, only one year of data are available for regular education students in grade 6 mathematics. In 2004, 4 percent of students were Advanced, 18 percent were Proficient, 40 percent were in Needs Improvement and 38 percent were in Warning.

#### **Special Education**

As a result of the school's grade expansion, only one year of data are available for Special Education students in grade 6 mathematics. In 2004, 7 percent of students scored in Needs Improvement and the remaining 93 percent were in the Warning range.

#### **Limited English Proficient**

Fewer than 10 LEP students were assessed in the grade 6 mathematics test; as such, no aggregated results are reported for this subgroup.

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<sup>1</sup>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 Normandin 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.

## **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 evident in 2004. In 2001, 2 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 9 percent in Proficient, 37 percent in Needs Improvement and 52 percent in Warning. In 2003, results were similar, with 2 percent Advanced, 10 percent Proficient, 35 percent in Needs Improvement and 53 percent in Warning. In 2004, 2 percent were Advanced, 12 percent were Proficient, 38 percent were in Needs Improvement and 48 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 90~97 percent. In 2004, 10 percent scored in the Needs Improvement range and the remaining 90 percent were in Warning.

### **Limited English Proficient**

Fewer than 10 LEP students were assessed in the grade 8 mathematics tests; as such, no aggregated results are reported for this subgroup.

## **PANEL RESPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS**

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

No. As a result of its review of Normandin Middle School documents and meetings with district and school personnel, the Panel Review Team concluded that, although the components of the Normandin Middle School's written School Improvement Plan incorporate some of the required areas of the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) protocol, the 2004–2005 School Improvement Plan (SIP) lacks the specificity to make it a sound plan for improving student achievement. The plan has not been constructed from a comprehensive analysis of the MCAS test items for the aggregate and all subgroups to clearly identify major weaknesses and specific performance gaps. The most notable deficiency of this plan is its failure to adequately identify and document root causes for poor performance or make causal links between the MCAS performance data, improvement objectives, instructional change objectives and outcome benchmarks. Further, the student learning objectives are broad and the logical links between causes for student weaknesses and the instructional change objectives and major strategies outlined to address them are not always apparent.

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

No. The school has not fully analyzed appropriate data and program information to identify the root causes of student performance gaps. The primary mechanism for collecting data on student achievement is the use of MCAS scores and TestWiz item analysis reports. While the review of these data reports strengthens data analysis efforts, it is deficient in that no formative assessments or program and curriculum evaluation process were included as part of the data analyzed. As a result, the data analysis lacks depth in the identification of student achievement information to accurately determine what knowledge and skills students lack and why student performance gaps exist.

The school's leadership and staff have not thoroughly investigated disaggregated data from multiple sources of student assessment data to identify the specific performance gaps and learning needs. In addition, a detailed analysis of student subgroup data and framed improvement initiatives in response to this data has not been conducted. The Normandin School Improvement Plan neglects to include a discussion or description of targeted improvement goals for specific subgroups. While the school has developed a set of Implementation Benchmarks as an addendum to plan for special education students (and this addendum identifies specific performance goals for this subgroup), the student learning objectives and instructional change objectives cited are identical to those identified for regular education students in both math and ELA. Without more detailed analysis, Normandin's school improvement goals rely on a broad orientation that may overlook critical issues impacting student achievement, both in the aggregate as well as with disaggregated subgroups.

The Normandin School Improvement Plan includes an extensive data analysis produced by the district that lists individual test items from the 2004 MCAS for math and ELA. The analysis lists the strands of the ELA and Math Curriculum Frameworks that the items address, as well as the particular skill or concept required to answer each item. In addition, the item analysis lists the difference between the scores received by Normandin students and the state average. This analysis offers a rich source of information from which the school can extract a clear picture of areas of student strength and weakness.

The panelists determined, however, that the student learning objectives that list the gaps identified by the school do not closely correlate with the evidence in the item analysis. In mathematics, for example, the greatest differences between Normandin scores and state averages occur in the area of geometry, e.g., item 7 (determining the Y-intercept) and item 17 (determining the slope of a line). Probability questions produced the next greatest gap between Normandin and the state average, including item 32 (determining the probability of a given event) followed by other geometry skills in items 28, 39 and 31, which ask students to determine area and measure angles.

The school's SIP defined its determination of student learning gaps in the Student Learning Objectives. One objective proposes that students will increase their use of fractions, decimals and percents, not major gaps identified in the data. Another objective references students' use of math vocabulary but the school offers no evidence that vocabulary was a factor in poor student

performance. The third math objective speaks to problem-solving practice and test-taking strategies – goals that are not specifically targeted to the students’ demonstrated weaknesses.

The panel concluded, however, that the Student Learning Objectives were not substantiated with a thorough analysis as evidenced by the example of choosing to focus on number sense, despite student assessment results that indicate more significant or pressing areas of need and discussion of pre-existing instructional practices, student performance under those conditions or identification of specific student achievement needs. In teacher interviews, staff members were often unable to articulate why a specific change in instructional programming would impact student achievement. As a result, causal links between change initiatives and improvement in student achievement appear weak.

The causes listed in the Normandin School Improvement Plan also tend to be written as re-statements of the problems students were having with the test. For example, causes are written in language that focuses on what students cannot do, rather than focus the lens on instructional practice. It is not enough to state that students cannot answer multi-step problems or that students have difficulty answering open-response questions. The Normandin School Improvement Plan does not peel back the layers of the causes; therefore, they do not get at the “root” of the cause. They did not attempt to answer “why” students are having such difficulties. When interviewed and also in the instructional staff survey, teachers would attempt to answer the “why” by focusing on socio-economic factors, over which the school has little to no control.

When asked by panelists about the success of previous improvement plan efforts, school staff and leaders reported they did not do a systematic review of previous plans. The 2004–2005 plan proposes to use strategies and monitoring tools described in the 2003–2004 plan, so the panelists felt that an assessment of their effectiveness is a critical step in deciding to continue their use. One tool for measuring the implementation of past plan strategies – the classroom walk-through checklist – has been used by administrators and curriculum directors. In his meeting with the Panel Review Team, the principal indicated that classroom walk-throughs would be the primary means of evaluating the effectiveness of the plan’s instructional objectives. The school provided a binder demonstrating extensive data collection using this measure. However, there was no indication that the school examined the checklist findings to determine if strategies were in place, being faithfully implemented or were consistent with designated instructional changes.

The Panel Review Team viewed the array of district curriculum documents provided to all teachers as a strong resource, supplying clear guidance in content, structure, pacing and often methodology. While staff interviews generally revealed a sound grasp of the many available curriculum materials and their appropriate use in instructional planning, the Panel was not convinced that past oversight of the instruction and evaluation of programs and initiatives capitalized on the scope of the curriculum documents generated by the district. The Panel Review Team also noted that, although student performance information is available from the district quarterly assessments for specific purposes, it appeared that the school did not take full advantage of this resource in monitoring student performance. Given the school’s failure to make good use of its data on program implementation, the panelists were not confident the school would skillfully monitor either continuing or new improvement efforts.

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

No. Normandin's School Improvement Plan does not consistently set forth specific improvement objectives that are grounded in accurate reasons for poor student performance and that address classroom level strategies necessary to increase student achievement. Further, the instructional change objectives in the School Improvement Plan are not specific enough to guide instruction and, therefore, cannot facilitate student learning and subsequent improved performance.

Student performance goals are in line with Adequate Yearly Progress targets and are specific and measurable. For mathematics, the school's performance goal declares, "Normandin Middle School will achieve a proficiency index of 49.8% in the 2004/05 mathematics MCAS by decreasing the percent of students scoring in Warning/Failing Low from 6% to 2.2% and in Warning/Failing High from 52.6% to 33.4%." Similarly, the school's performance goal for English language arts states, "Normandin will achieve a proficiency rating index of 71.3% in the 2004/05 English MCAS by decreasing the percent of students scoring in Warning/Failing Low from 0.7% to 0.4% and in Warning/Failing High from 15.9% to 3.0%." Both goals are stated in the format recommended by the PIM process and offer a clear target for improvement.

However, the math and ELA Student Learning Objectives are at times too broad, not targeted on student learning or not clearly connected to causal analysis. One mathematics objective states, "Students will understand and use math vocabulary correctly to communicate and solve problems." Similarly, one English language arts objective states, "Students will increase their knowledge of vocabulary in all content areas." While these are worthy objectives for students, it is unclear what students are expected to do to demonstrate "understanding" and "use" of their vocabulary; in addition, the objective does not describe the level of proficiency they will be expected to achieve. For the most part, student learning objectives are not articulated in specific terms that teachers can address and assess in the classroom context.

The panel concluded that there is a weak logical connection between several of the school's learning objectives and the plan's instructional change objectives. In ELA, the first student learning objective states, "Students will identify, analyze and apply knowledge using a variety of reading materials." The Instructional Change Objective associated with that goal states, "Identifying, analyzing and applying information using a variety of reading materials will become a school-wide focus." The panel wondered whether the reading skills defined in the instructional change objective represented a true change from previous practice. Panelists questioned whether the school had evidence that teachers had not been focusing their instruction on these central reading skills in the past and, therefore, the instructional "change" would be a major break from previous effort. School personnel could not provide other than anecdotal evidence that some teachers had, in fact, not been emphasizing a variety of materials in their instruction. The panel concluded that the instructional change objectives in general do not represent any significant change in practices and are, therefore, unlikely to bring about change in student learning.

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

No. The plan does not specify strategies that appear likely to lead to improved student results. One can discern connections between the majority of instructional strategies outlined in the action plans and the student learning objectives but the logical links to those strategies from specific root causes are not always apparent. Additionally, the instructional strategies selected do not appear to have been research-based or have a demonstrated level of effectiveness.

The plan lacks instructional focus and alignment between root causes and instructional strategies in the content areas. In the item analysis provided in the plan, for example, student gaps appear in the area of data analysis, statistics and probability in mathematics. However, the school's learning objectives focus on other areas of mathematics, such as vocabulary and number sense. The strategies outlined in the plan address the school's identified needs but, even if implemented fully, the strategies will not be likely to lead to improved student results. The use of word walls and vocabulary sections in math journals, for example, is not a strategy that is likely to improve students' ability to solve math problems because the vocabulary is presented out of context. Similarly, the use of oral presentations in all content areas is not likely to improve students' ability to write coherent compositions or frame effective responses for open-response questions.

The majority of instructional strategies selected do not appear to offer specific instructional guidance that can improve teachers' instruction and lead to improved student results. For example, Math Goal #1 focuses on three different student learning objectives, cites thirteen general causes, three generic instructional change objectives and twenty major strategies. Of the twenty major strategies, many have little relation to the student learning objectives for the content area, as evidenced by the references to Unified Arts: "Unified Arts will institute problem of the day – relating math to subject area;" Individualized Student Success Plans: "Interviews with individual students to discuss MCAS scores, strengths and weakness (ISSPs);" or New Bedford High School student tutors: "Provide classroom-based tutoring/support opportunities for students utilizing NBHS seniors when available throughout the school year." The vast number of strategies (which are, in many cases, the same strategies cited in the 2003 – 2004 plan) and the failure of the school to determine if the strategies were effective when used previously led the panel to conclude that the school's plan is not likely to lead to improved student results.

The extensive list of major strategies makes it difficult to discriminate areas of instructional priority. Without an analysis of specific content objectives and agreement to instructional strategies used to support student learning, it is unlikely that improvement goals will have a positive effect on student performance.

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

No. The school's written improvement plan fails to identify clear instructional expectations for teachers and specific student learning objectives that address filling in the gaps in necessary student content knowledge and skills. The plan offers insufficient guidance to allow teachers to implement instructional changes that will likely result in improved student performance.

While the current plan reflects growth in using the PIM process on the part of school personnel, it lacks specificity and clarity for many of the plan's components. In addition to the lack of correlation between the school's identification of student learning gaps and the evidence in the data analysis, there is also a lack of clear descriptions in the instructional changes that are expected of teachers. As noted previously, the Instructional Change Objectives (ICO) are written to parallel the student learning objectives and offer little specific guidance to teachers on how these strategies should be implemented in order to elicit improvement. One ICO in ELA declares, "A variety of writing formats will be incorporated into routine instructional practices across the curriculum." Without clearer guidance on the expectations for quality products from students following instruction in the variety of writing formats, it is unclear how the change in instruction will bring about the related student learning gains ("Students will write a detailed response with clear focus, logically related ideas and adequate supporting details in all content areas."). Activities in the SIP to carry out this particular instructional change include: (a) using Bloom's taxonomy, (b) posting weekly open-response questions, (c) using graphic organizers, and (d) using Inspiration software. With the exception of use of a common scoring rubric, the panel was uncertain that these actions would lead to desired results.

Lack of focus on specific student achievement outcomes appears to have confused the understanding of the School Improvement Plan objectives, as evidenced within the Instructional Staff Survey results. When asked to describe what they are expected to do to improve student performance according to the School Improvement Plan, many teachers described their role in terms of programs, not specific student learning outcomes. Typical responses include: "1) Connected Math, 2) Follow the Leaders, 3) Inspiration software," or "I have students go to the Math Lab for extra help," or "We are implementing the Skillful Teacher in the classroom." While many staff members spoke positively during focus groups and individual interviews about newly adopted programs or their changing instructional practice, their inability to articulate specific student learning objectives and changes in instructional practice to address the gaps embedded in the student learning objectives as the focus of their work indicates the School Improvement Plan is not an adequate guide for teachers' actions and changing instructional practice to address the gaps in student skills and knowledge.

The Normandin School Improvement Plan identifies implementation benchmarks for monitoring periodic progress of the initiatives such as walk-throughs by administrative staff and curriculum supervisors, meeting notes, agendas and lesson plan documentation. While these are ways to measure whether changes are being implemented, they do not provide measures of whether the changes are having an impact on student learning. Additionally, almost all timelines in the plan are simply listed as "SY 2004–2005." There are no intermediate steps or points during the year when progress of the school's initiatives will be assessed. Such indications do not support the concept of planned methodical progress toward clear goals. Failure to include rigorous assessment measures and using this data to inform instruction reflects an approach lacking in accountability and insight about the steps that the school is taking to improve student performance.

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

No. While the school improvement planning process was modeled on the Massachusetts Department of Education PIM protocol and had the assistance of the district school support specialist, focused and specific roles and responsibilities of staff members to develop and monitor an improvement plan for the 2004–2005 school year remain unclear.

Much of the content found in the 2004–2005 plan has been copied from information found in the 2003–2004 plan. Even though the 2004–2005 plan seemed to be inclusive in informing all teachers of the plan's contents, the data analysis that led to the identification of priorities was not adjusted to reflect consideration of the 2004 MCAS data results. During the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) interview, school leaders were asked why the content of the 2004–2005 plan contained the same or similar information from the previous year's plan. School leaders could not adequately respond to why the content was similar, why the same concerns kept surfacing two years in a row and, more importantly, why they thought listing them in the 2004–2005 plan would make a difference when they were not able to articulate ongoing use and analysis of the most recent MCAS results or recent district benchmark exam results. Despite the fact that all of this student assessment data was available to them, the ILT was not able to speak articulately about using this data to inform or update the plan and, furthermore, they do not use the data in a meaningful way to make decisions about ongoing classroom instruction. Consequently, a concern remains as to the school's ability to evaluate the plan's implementation or make adjustments when needed as a result of ongoing analysis and effective monitoring.

There is no reference to any regular review of progress or for plans to revise the School Improvement Plan based on the school's actual experience with it. The absence of such review will weaken successful plan implementation. The Panel Review Team considered this absence to be a significant flaw in the school's plan.

Interviews with the district support personnel indicated that they understood the shortcomings noted above and expressed interest in making necessary adjustments to strengthen and improve the school's plan.

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

Yes. As a result of classroom observations of instructional practices, observations of school climate and interviews with Normandin's ILT and individual teachers and parents, the Panel Review Team concluded that conditions sufficient to support successful improvement efforts are evident within the school. Despite the deficiencies of the written School Improvement Plan outlined in Key Question 1, there is widespread commitment to the plan's improvement initiatives from administrators, teachers and parents. Teachers and parents expressed confidence in the school principal and other school leaders to expand upon improvement efforts currently being delivered to the school's students. School personnel are acutely aware of and committed to the improvement of students' academic achievement. Teachers described discussions at weekly

common planning time meetings as helpful in discussing issues related to curriculum, instruction and student needs. In addition, the new state-of-the-art school building, adequate personnel and instructional material resources are in place to support successful plan implementation. With an enhanced School Improvement Plan and focused support from the district school support specialist in the planning process, the Panel Review Team concluded that conditions are in place for the successful implementation of a Normandin School Improvement Plan.

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

Yes. The school is well managed and there is strong leadership. The Panel Review Team found a safe, orderly school clearly focused on the school community's core values of respect for self, others and the school. Students appeared engaged and well behaved. Evident were high expectations for student behavior, which were met without exception on the days of the Panel Review visit. During interviews, an assistant principal commented that the ILT is committed to providing a "climate that is conducive to safety and to a motivated learning environment."

There is clear support expressed by the faculty for the school principal and his leadership team reported in both the faculty surveys and teacher interviews. During interviews, parents also expressed their positive opinion of the principal and his school improvement efforts to establish and maintain a positive school climate. Eighty percent of respondents to the Instructional Staff Survey indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Our school principal provides effective leadership to guide and support staff efforts to improve the academic performance of our students." His communication with school staff is frequent and varied. The principal provides and encourages staff to use school e-mail to share information on school happenings, notices and meeting notes, and implements the school-wide walk-through checklist about desirable characteristics for classroom environments.

Instructional leadership by the principal is complemented with the work of the assistant principals and the math and English language arts curriculum supervisors – each of whom use the walk-through checklist to work with teachers in sharing lesson feedback, modeling lessons or sharing behavior management techniques. The math and ELA curriculum supervisors reported they understand their responsibility to implement the plan's strategies in their content areas. Eighty-four percent of respondents to the Instructional Staff Survey indicated that the district provided adequate curriculum guidance.

Professional development activities, focused on the elements of a good lesson as defined in the *Skillful Teacher* (Research for Better Teaching), have been presented and continue to be a focus for the current school year. Seventy-eight percent of respondents to the Instructional Staff Survey indicated that the professional development was available and adequate. Staff consistently referred to the *Skillful Teacher* as being a major focus for their professional development. All teachers have a copy of the *Skillful Teacher* and discuss specific chapters during faculty meetings. In focus groups, school leaders acknowledged the need to develop a comprehensive process for review and assessment of effective instructional practices but that development is only in the beginning stages and, at present, consists of walk-through checklists, common planning team meeting notes and classroom observations.

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

Yes. The school’s teachers consistently referred to the School Improvement Plan as being a focus for their instruction that would lead to improved student performance. The School Improvement Plan priorities, including vocabulary development and focus on writing skills, were consistently referred to and confirmed as the most significant instructional areas of concern across content areas and grade levels. While the Panel felt the expectations of teachers listed in the plan are not sufficient to bring about improvement in student learning, there is widespread understanding of the expectations and belief that they will make a difference. The Instructional Staff Survey reported 85 percent of the staff agreed or strongly agreed that the school has a well-defined plan for reaching student performance goals. In focus groups and interviews, the school staff indicated that they have been involved in the school improvement planning process and engaged in discussions about the plan implementation. Eighty-six percent of respondents to the Instructional Staff Survey indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I am well informed about the initiatives that are undertaken by our school leadership and staff to improve student performance.” In a focus group with the School Council, council members appeared knowledgeable about the plan’s content and expressed clarity about the intended goals and strategies contained in the current plan.

In response to other survey questions and in teacher interviews and focus groups, teachers expressed agreement with identified needs and improvement strategies and believed the School Improvement Plan strategies would result in improvement of student performance. Teachers indicated that they were implementing aspects of the current plan, including elements of a good teaching lesson, instructing content vocabulary and using math warm-ups, graphic organizers and district quarterly tests. Student discussion during focus groups corroborated the use of graphic organizers, warm-ups and lesson activators. Visual evidence in classrooms demonstrates teachers are focusing instruction on identified priorities. Ninety-five percent of classroom observations conducted during the panel review revealed classrooms that were focused on ELA or math priorities in the plan. The impact of plan implementation on raising student achievement is an open question, however, given the lack of clear steps to measure if School Improvement Plan objectives are effective.

The commitment of the school faculty to the planned improvement objectives was also questioned by the Panel Review Team upon a review of faculty responses in the Instructional Staff Survey to the question, “What are the most significant causes of low student performance at your school and what needs to occur to improve student performance?” The majority of responses identified non-instructional barriers, such as lack of parental support, to student achievement. The survey response parallels the “causes” listed in the improvement plan – causes that describe student learning weaknesses as problems caused by students, not by any factors controlled by the school. The School Improvement Plan states a cause of ELA learning gaps to be the students’ lack of skill in “analyzing text for meaning and supporting it with evidence,” which is a factor frequently mentioned in the survey responses from instructional staff. The panel questions whether the staff will be supportive of improvement plans that raise expectations for teacher accountability of student achievement. Currently, the focus of attention in the plan’s

strategies is on changes in classroom procedures that teachers are expected to make, not on changes in instructional practices.

The shortcomings of the School Improvement Plan identified earlier in this report – including the failure to clearly evaluate prior plans and programs to fully inform new planning efforts as well as the absence of clear, measurable benchmarks, and thorough assessment activities – are significant for Normandin’s faculty and its improvement planning efforts at this time. A clear process for the regular review and assessment of meaningful instructional practices is not yet evident. Because the original analysis of data was not thorough enough to uncover the root causes of poor student performance, the strategies do not address the core of instruction and are not clear student-centered initiatives. Staff acceptance is therefore evolving without the depth to drive a rigorous improvement effort.

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

Yes. The Panel Review Team found that the district has provided the support in personnel and financial resources to enhance improvement initiatives at Normandin Middle School. The superintendent and assistant superintendents seemed well aware of the school’s overriding needs and described them in clear and focused terms. However, the district’s approval of a plan that is significantly deficient in its accurate identification of student learning needs and the causes for the gaps in achievement suggest less than adequate guidance in the development of a sound plan for change.

In an interview with the panelists, the superintendent described his analysis of the adequacy of the school’s administrative staff conducted during the 2003–2004 school year. In response to the assessment, he directed the hiring of additional administrative staff for the Normandin Middle School and added a third assistant principal for the 2004–2005 school year.

The district supports the school by providing K-12 curriculum directors who develop the curriculum documents and visit the school to conduct classroom walk-throughs and to monitor adherence to the district curriculum. In addition, district quarterly tests are developed using *Follow the Leaders* software. However, a systematic way to share results of this testing with staff and to prepare teachers to make use of this information to adjust instructional planning has yet to be developed.

Efforts to examine in greater detail the instructional program and precise learning gaps for students is an essential support for Normandin of which the district is aware. Teachers and school leaders referred to the high accessibility, visibility and active engagement of district leaders in curriculum and assessment efforts. Systemically, district leaders are committed to the allocation of funding and professional development to provide to the school requisite resources to support curriculum programs. For example, the district has adopted a new math curriculum, purchased Connected Mathematics Project (CMP) text and materials for 6-8 and is currently providing the professional development to teachers using the CMP modules.

Both the principal and faculty reported that district level support has been sufficient. In the School Leadership Report, the principal cited that the district was “incredibly supportive” of the school’s efforts by providing requested staffing and programming. Staff survey results indicated that district-level support was available and adequate in terms of curriculum guidance and implementation (84%), assessment (78%) and professional development (78%).

The district school support specialist, responsible for assisting New Bedford schools with the development of their improvement plans, acknowledged the need for revisions to the 2004–2005 plan and noted the strong support for the plan evident in the building. The district school support specialist believes there is a willingness to continue to make efforts to improve and to respond to further guidance and suggestions on the part of the principal and faculty.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Panel Review Team found that, while the Normandin Middle School has developed a framework for change, the present School Improvement Plan was not the result of a thorough, well-documented analysis of data, an accurate interpretation of the available data or a broadly based school discussion of multiple sources of performance information reflecting the underlying causes for poor student achievement. Normandin’s School Improvement Plan document lacks a coherent connection between student performance data and learning objectives. Instructional change objectives established under the plan describe activities that reflect the elements of a good teaching lesson but neglect to address the key instructional strategies to address specific, targeted gaps in student skills and knowledge that will improve student achievement. Further, the plan includes stated benchmarks for evaluating plan activities but lacks an articulated protocol to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these activities at the school.

The Panel Review Team agreed that the staff offers strong support for the plan’s purpose and the role expected of the faculty in carrying out those purposes, though presently the expectations of faculty are not focused on deep instructional change. There is a positive school climate and high staff morale within the building, much of that directly attributable to the staff’s positive perceptions of the principal and his support of the school’s efforts to transition from a junior high to a middle school. In the panel’s judgment, the staff and administrators have in place many of the structures, resources and procedures to develop, implement and monitor a sound School Improvement Plan. If the fundamental weaknesses in the Normandin School Improvement Plan were corrected, the panel is optimistic the school can increase the likelihood that student achievement will improve to expected targets.

**APPENDIX A  
Team Members**

**Dr. Karen Laba, Panel Chairperson**, Director of Resource Development, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

**Nancy Mrzyglod, Panel Co-chair**, Consultant, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

**Erin Furey Patterson, Panel Coordinator**, Office of Accountability and Targeted Assistance, Massachusetts Department of Education, Malden, MA

**Salvatore L. Cammarata, Panel Member**, Principal, Garfield Magnet School, Revere Public Schools, Revere, MA

**James M. Gibney, Panel Member**, Principal, Westport Middle School, Westport Community Schools, Westport, MA

**Ruth Gilbert-Whitner, Panel Member**, Assistant Superintendent, Whitman-Hanson Regional School District, Whitman, MA

**Andrew Tuite, Panel Member**, School Support Specialist, Boston Public Schools, Boston, MA

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**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

11:00 – 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