

## **REPORT OF FACT FINDING REVIEW Massachusetts Department of Education**

### **Brightwood Elementary School Springfield School District**

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Under the direction of the Massachusetts Department of Education, an independent Fact Finding Review Team (FFT) was assembled to further investigate the root causes of Brightwood Elementary School's recent designation as an under-performing school, as well as to analyze and describe the prospects for improvement. The team's visit was conducted from February 7-9 and on March 8, 2005. Activities of the FFT included classroom observations; in-depth group interviews with school leaders; focus group interviews with faculty, students and staff; review of numerous school documents provided by the school and the D.O.E.; and hours of team consultation.

The FFT's key findings are listed below and organized according to the four domains investigated in the Fact Finding Review protocol: Curriculum and Instruction, School Climate, Organizational Structures and Management, and Leadership and Planning.

#### **I. Curriculum and Instruction**

Inconsistency in instructional quality was identified as an important cause for the school's history of low achievement. The review team concluded that weakness in instruction could be tied directly to a history of unstable leadership and management practices. Listed below are key issues in the Curriculum and Instruction domain.

- The curriculum's scope and sequence was not uniformly and consistently being followed in the areas of English language arts and math.
- Student achievement data were available and potentially informative but were not being used effectively to clarify the explicit learning needs of individuals or student subgroups.
- Professional development provided by the district seemed ample and relevant, yet – due to lack of effective management and monitoring – it was not successfully being translated into classroom practice. This was most evident in the areas of Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) work and the utilization of student performance data to guide instruction.
- Performance evaluation and supervision practices were not effectively implemented.

Key recommendations are:

- Establish a rigorous system of supervision and evaluation.
- Use the Performance Improvement Mapping (P.I.M.) process to dig deeper into the existing assessment data to obtain a more sophisticated view of the reasons for stalled student achievement.
- Develop a protocol for scrutinizing lesson plans to ensure that the curriculum scope and sequence are being followed.
- Conduct school-wide discussions about student learning expectations and the elements of rigorous instruction.

## II. School Climate

Through interviews with more than 30 members of the faculty and administration, classroom observation and review of printed materials, the team was able to acquire a sense of the school climate and culture. The physical climate within the school was found to be clean, spacious and inviting. By and large, the climate within classrooms reflected this warm inviting feel. Interactions between teachers and students seemed generally respectful and caring. The classroom climate was rated consistently high by classroom observers. A serious issue with professional morale, however, was found within the school. Feelings of anxiety and frustration were prevalent among teachers and administrators alike. The team concluded that the presence of these difficult feelings could be explained by two primary factors: The stress brought upon the entire organization by the urgent, real need to improve student performance and the lack of shared commitment to a vision for school improvement on the part of the school's professional community.

Key recommendations are:

- Prior to opening school in the fall of 2005, engage the entire school community in developing a shared mission and accompanying goals.
- Continue to maximize opportunities for teachers/staff/administration to come together to openly discuss issues, exchange ideas and to make shared decisions.
- The school must develop explicit and sound communication channels to provide information and feedback about the PIM process, the work of the School Leadership Team (SLT) and the School Council for Decision Making (SCDM).

## III. Organizational Structures and Management

The FFT prioritized three organizational structures they believed must be more firmly established and well-managed to ensure improved student performance at the Brightwood:

- 1) A structure for teacher collaboration and planning
- 2) A structure for school-based leadership and decision making
- 3) A structure for evaluation and supervision of all professional staff

The collective intent of prioritizing these structures was to encourage the creation of an organizational culture characterized by a common commitment to high levels of professional practice, frequent professional collaboration and a leadership model that values shared decision making.

Key recommendations are:

- Develop a more effective meeting schedule to promote collaboration.
- Build the capacity and effectiveness of the SLT and the SCDM by: building the teams' work around the realization of the school's mission, vision and values; developing consensus around the philosophies, programs and services offered by the school; and clearly defining the roles, responsibilities and limits of authority of each team.
- Through teacher collaboration and planning structures, provide faculty and staff with opportunities for input into the decisions that impact their work.

## IV. Leadership and Planning

The current leader at Brightwood was found to be passionate and determined to improve student performance. In this school year, strong managerial and organizational skills and a directive leadership style by the principal have yielded positive results in setting the stage for improvement. At the same time, this leadership approach has created challenges in the areas of school climate and staff morale. Three elements of instructional leadership were viewed as lacking and in need of improvement:

- 1) The ability to collaborate effectively with faculty and other groups in decision making
- 2) The ability to analyze and monitor student progress through the use and communication of a variety of assessment data
- 3) The ability to evaluate and supervise the effectiveness of teachers' instructional practice

Key recommendations are:

- The district leadership should continue to connect weekly with the principal for mentoring and coaching.
- Critically review the structures related to the management, leadership and delivery of the professional development program to identify the root causes of the disconnect between professional development efforts and what is actually being translated into practice.
- The district leadership should continue to make regular visits to Brightwood and engage in walk-through observations with the principal as a source of support and encouragement for the principal, teachers and students.

## Fact Finding Review Process

The Fact Finding Review is the third stage in the process used to assess school performance under the Massachusetts School and District Accountability System. At the first stage of the process, a school's performance and improvement on state MCAS tests is rated. Schools that perform in the lowest School Performance Rating categories (very high percentage of students with failing MCAS performance; low percentage proficient and advanced) may be referred for a Panel Review.

The Panel Review process constitutes the second stage of the School and District Accountability System. Panel Reviews are conducted to assist the Commissioner of Education in determining whether state intervention is needed to guide improvement efforts in schools where students' MCAS performance is critically low and no trend toward improved student performance is evident from MCAS data. Panels consisting of 5-8 members review data and written information on the school's performance and improvement efforts and spend two days visiting the school and meeting with school and district leaders.

The Review Panel's charge is to advise the Commissioner of Education at the conclusion of the review process of its judgment on two questions:

- Does the school under review have a sound plan for improving student performance?
- Are the conditions in place for the successful implementation of the school's improvement plan?

If the answer to either or both of these questions is no, the Commissioner may declare the school to be under-performing.

Schools that are declared to be under-performing enter the third stage in the School and District Accountability System and undergo an in-depth diagnostic Fact Finding Review.

The purposes of the Fact Finding Review are to:

- Provide an in-depth diagnosis of the school's strengths and areas for improvement, including specific causal analysis
- Use extensive observation (school and classroom) to build a knowledge base for the school's planning work
- Make specific recommendations for the development of the school's improvement plan

The Fact Finding Team's charge is to advise the Commissioner and Board of Education at the conclusion of the review process of its judgment on two key questions:

1. What are the reasons for the low levels of student performance in ELA and mathematics at this school?
2. What are the prospects for improved student performance at this school?

The Fact Finding Team answers the key questions based on evidence collected through observations of teaching and learning; interviews of faculty, students, administrators, district personnel and other school stakeholders; and through the review of documents, including the school improvement plan, student assessment information, curriculum documents and student work. The team's judgments must be robust and fully supported by evidence.

The Fact Finding Team's judgments are guided by a protocol that requires the team to respond to the key questions in each of the following domains: curriculum and instruction; school climate; organizational structures and management; leadership and planning. The Fact Finding Team uses its professional judgment to focus on domains that reveal key strengths and areas for improvement in the school.

## **Brightwood School Profile**

### **Enrollment**

Brightwood School is one of thirty-two elementary schools in Springfield. The school serves students in grades K-5. Enrollment at the Brightwood School has decreased from 475 in 2001 to 359 as of October 1 of this school year. Student demographics have remained relatively stable, with noticeable changes evident in the Limited English Proficient and Special Education populations.

Between 2001 and 2004, the proportions of Hispanic, Black, and White students attending Brightwood were stable. In 2004, 75 percent of the population was Hispanic, 20 percent was Black and 5 percent was White. Asian students accounted for 1 percent in 2001; in subsequent years, there were no Asian students at the school. In most years between 2001 and 2004 (including 2004), 91 percent of the Brightwood School's students were from low income families. In 2004, 38 percent of the students are reported as having a primary language other than English. This represents a decrease from 40 percent in 2001. Limited English Proficient students represented 34 percent of the school's student population in 2001; in 2004 this figure is 32 percent. This school year, 17 percent of students are reported to be receiving special education services – a 6 percent decrease from 2003.

In 2004, Brightwood School registered an attendance rate of 90.5 percent, with students absent 15.9 days on average. The school's retention rate was 4.7 percent in 2003, the last year for which data are available. Out-of-school suspensions averaged 14.3 percent, more than 8 percentage points above the state's 6.1 average. The in-school suspension rate in 2003 was 6.7 percent, and 5.1 percent of the population were excluded from school for disciplinary reasons. The state's exclusion rate for the same year was 2.0 percent.

### **Staffing**

The 2004-2005 Brightwood School's staffing report indicates that the school is composed of 1 administrator, 39 teachers, 1 guidance counselor and 1 school psychologist. Approximately 25 percent of educators at the school have been there for three or fewer years. Nearly 88 percent of teachers are reported as being licensed in their current teaching area.

## **MCAS Overview**

Students at Brightwood School are assessed in grades 3 and 4 in English language arts (ELA) and in grade 4 in mathematics. The school has not made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in ELA since 1999, nor has it made AYP in mathematics since 2002. In the school's Cycle III End-of-Cycle (2003-2004) AYP Report, the school failed to make AYP in ELA in the aggregate and for all of the reported subgroups: Limited English Proficient, Free/Reduced Price Lunch and Hispanic.<sup>1</sup> In mathematics, the school failed to make AYP in the aggregate and for both of the two reported subgroups: Free/Reduced Price Lunch and Hispanic. The school is currently identified for Restructuring in ELA and for Improvement in Mathematics.

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

### **GRADE 3**

#### **Regular Education**

At the grade 3 level in Reading, the performance of regular education students has been variable since the test was first introduced in 2001. In 2001, 30 percent of students was found Proficient, 60 percent performed at the Needs Improvement level and 10 percent at the Warning level. In 2002, the percentage of proficient students increased to 34 percent, Needs Improvement decreased to 47 percent and Warning increased to 19 percent. Similar results were registered for 2003. In the most recent administration of the MCAS test, the percentage of students who scored at the Proficient level decreased to 26 percent, the percentage of students at the Warning level decreased to 9 percent and the percentage of students in Needs Improvement increased to 66.

#### **Special Education**

Results for Special Education students tested in grade 3 Reading have also been variable. In 2002, 6 percent scored in the Proficient range, 75 percent was in Needs Improvement and 19 percent in Warning. In 2003, there was a significant performance decline, with 63 percent in the Warning range and 37 percent in Needs Improvement. In 2004, results were slightly worse than those of 2002: 6 percent Proficient, 65 percent Needs Improvement and 29 percent Warning. This variation is likely correlated to the small sample sizes (16 to 19 students) tested.

#### **Limited English Proficient**

As in the Special Education subgroup, results for LEP students vary over the years, with the worst performance registered in 2003 and 2004. In 2004, 10 percent of students scored in Proficient, 43 percent in Needs Improvement and 48 percent in Warning. In 2003, 0 percent scored in Proficient, 13 percent scored in Needs Improvement and 88 percent scored in Warning. In 2002, 53 percent scored in Proficient, 35 percent scored in Needs Improvement and 12 percent were in Warning. Sample sizes for this student group ranged from 16 to 25 students.

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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 Brightwood Elementary School in 2004 were Limited English Proficient, Free/Reduced Price Lunch, and Hispanic for ELA, and Free/Reduced Price Lunch and Hispanic for mathematics.

**GRADE 4****Regular Education**

Results for regular education students in grade 4 English language arts are variable between 2001 and 2004. In 2001, no students scored in the Advanced range, 13 percent scored in Proficient, 58 percent in Needs Improvement and 30 percent in Warning. The year 2002 results represent improvement: 3 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 12 percent in Proficient, 76 percent in Needs Improvement and 9 percent in Warning. In 2004, results more closely resembled the 2001 results: no students were Advanced, 6 percent in Proficient, 75 percent in Needs Improvement and 19 percent in Warning.

**Special Education**

Scores for Special Education students in grade 4 ELA have remained consistently low, with a slight increase in the percentage of students scoring in the Proficient categories in the last two years. In 2004, 6 percent of Special Education students scored in the Proficient range, 38 percent in Needs Improvement and 56 percent in Warning. In 2003, the percentage in Warning was 76. In 2002, no students were Proficient, 58 percent were in Needs Improvement and 42 percent were in Warning. Sample sizes ranged from 16 to 19 students in these years.

**Limited English Proficient**

Scores for LEP students in the grade 4 ELA test have been consistently low, though an improvement trend is evident between 2001 and 2004. In 2001, 100 percent of the students in this category scored in the Warning range. By 2003, this percentage had decreased to 79, with the remaining 21 percent scoring in Needs Improvement. In 2004, 4 percent of students scored in the Proficient range, 35 percent in Needs Improvement and 62 percent in Warning.

**Student Performance in Mathematics****GRADE 4****Regular Education**

The performance of regular education students in grade 4 mathematics at this school has been variable, with a slight performance decline evident between 2002 and 2004. In 2002, 3 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 21 percent in Proficient, 56 percent in Needs Improvement and 21 percent in Warning. In 2003, 2 percent of students was Advanced, 5 percent scored in the Proficient range, 49 percent in Needs Improvement and 44 percent in Warning. In 2004, no students were Advanced, the percentage of Proficient students increased to 10, and the percentage of students in the Warning category was 42.

**Special Education**

Scores for Special Education students in grade 4 mathematics have remained consistently low. Between 2001 and 2004 the percent scoring in the Warning category range between 50 and 89 percent for the 16 - 20 students assessed in the different years. In 2003, 88 percent was in Warning and 12 percent in Needs Improvement. In 2004, 6 percent were Proficient, 25 percent in Needs Improvement and 69 percent in Warning.

**Limited English Proficient**

*Data for LEP students are available for 2003 only, due to the small number of students tested. In that year, 100 percent of the 17 students assessed scored in the Warning category.*

## Key Domains of Inquiry

### I: Curriculum and Instruction

The findings included in this section of the report are based largely on direct classroom observations made by the Fact Finding Team (FFT) during their visit. Other evidence gathered and considered included printed curriculum materials and data gathered from interviews with the faculty, students, the School Council for Decision Making (SCDM), the school leadership team (SLT) and school and district administrators. The team conducted thirty classrooms observations, twenty of which were 30 to 45 minutes in length. The remaining ten were 5- to 10-minute walk-through visits. All classrooms in each grade were observed at least once.

The quality of instruction was inconsistent. Of the twenty extended observations conducted, 7 (35%) were rated as “Exemplifies Good Practice,” 6 (30%) “Meets Acceptable Standard” and 7 (35%) “Does Not Meet Acceptable Standard.” The ten short walk-through observations conducted on the final day of the visit verified this same proportional breakdown of lesson quality (3 exemplary, 4 acceptable, 3 unacceptable).

This inconsistency in quality was evident in five key instructional elements: 1) pace of instruction/use of time; 2) meeting the needs of individual students; 3) use of effective and appropriate teaching methodologies; 4) classroom management; 5) effectiveness of classroom support from paraprofessional, special needs (SPED) English Language Learner (ELL) staff. Typically observations of both the weakest and strongest lessons showed a dynamic interrelationship among all five of the key instructional elements listed above. The degree of success that teachers had in addressing one element impacted the quality level of the other lesson components. Not surprisingly, the FFT observed that the teachers of those lessons rated as exemplary successfully incorporated all of these elements, while those rated as acceptable or unacceptable did not. The findings outlined below come from evidence taken from actual observation notes and team debriefing sessions. They are offered here to further describe the variability in instructional quality observed during the team’s visit.

Lack of skill in pacing instruction was a common weakness observed. In several lessons where whole group instruction was too slow-paced or employed for too long, observers noted minimal evidence of learning. Examples of methods observed included: a homework review that asked students to report their answers to multiple-choice math problems without getting corrective feedback for an incorrect response; teachers calling students up one at a time to write their estimate to a problem or their sentence on the board; and using whole group/teacher-led instruction with a lower elementary grade students for 45 minutes. In each example, many students became restless or inattentive due to lack of engagement and rigor; little attempt was made to ensure that the needs of all students were being met. It was common to find support personnel or co-teachers relatively uninvolved in the lesson’s core activities.

In other lessons, instruction that was excessively fast-paced produced similar results. The students with quick thinking/rapid response style would be allowed to control the pace of the lesson at the expense of those who needed more process time. More often than not, students who responded incorrectly would not be challenged to rethink their reasoning or be given corrective feedback. They were frequently overlooked while another student gave the correct answer. In

both cases above, the choice and improper implementation of methodology caused the needs of many students to remain unmet and served as a catalyst for the deterioration of student behavior.

Listed below are other characteristics prevalent in observed lessons that failed to meet acceptable standards of practice.

- Unnecessary written exercises, e.g., copying and coloring
- Over-dependence on worksheets, with all students working on the same exercise and little apparent attention to individualizing instruction
- Lack of evidence of clear and routinely enforced rules for classroom behavior. It was common for answers to be ‘shouted out,’ where student over-exuberance resulted in confusion and chaos.
- At times, limited and/or ineffective utilization of classroom support personnel (paraprofessionals, SPED, ESL) and also evidence of classroom support personnel with insufficient knowledge and skill
- Inability to engage with students who don’t respond to questions or respond incorrectly and teachers moving on too quickly without checking for understanding or making an effort to stimulate higher order thinking
- Failure to establish, communicate and utilize clear lesson objectives
- Ineffective use of small group instruction, centers and cooperative learning techniques
- Presentation of work that was unchallenging and inappropriately below the students’ grade level

By contrast, in one exemplary lesson where large group instructional practice proved successful, the teacher made very effective use of student “slates” to ensure that all students were actively and enthusiastically engaged and were all receiving immediate corrective feedback and praise. In this lesson, support personnel worked closely and effectively with individual students who were having difficulty, suggesting cooperative pre-planning with consideration given to differentiated student abilities and needs. Teachers in one Sheltered English Immersion (S.E.I.) classroom created a “language-rich learning environment” by effectively utilizing a variety of instructional methods (learning centers and large and small group instruction). The centers were well planned and effectively addressed diverse needs and important skills (word recognition, oral language development, letter and sounds recognition, teaching vocabulary prior to the reading passage). The pace of learning and use of time was efficient. Large and small group instruction was engaging, relevant and fun. Student misbehavior was quickly and appropriately corrected. Finally, several lessons delivered by the ELA Collaborative Professional Development Teacher (CPDT) and the school’s writing specialist presented classic examples of effective instructional modeling. The classroom teachers both took notes on the coach’s work, while helping to re-direct some students and prompting them to reflect on their work.

In considering the causes for this lack of consistency in the quality of instruction, the core team first examined variables of teaching experience (at Brightwood and total experience) and level of education. It was hypothesized that differences in these variables might logically relate to instructional quality. Upon examining these data, however, no clear relationships became apparent (see Table 1); that is, exemplary and substandard lessons were conducted in about equal proportions by both experienced and inexperienced teachers and by teachers with and without advanced degrees. The data reveal that teachers of average lessons were highly experienced and all but one held advanced degrees in education.

**Table 1: Lesson quality compared with experience variables, grade level and teacher educational level**

Instructional Quality	Average Experience at Brightwood	Average Experience Total	Educational Level
<b>Exemplary</b> N = 7	<b>5.2 years</b> (3.8, not including most experienced teacher)	<b>11.7 years</b> (7.8, not including most experienced teacher)	<b>3 Masters</b> <b>4 Bachelors</b>
<b>Met Acceptable Standard</b> N = 6	<b>8.3 years</b> (7.2, not including most experienced teacher)	<b>14.5 years</b> (13.4, not including most experienced teacher)	<b>5 Masters</b> <b>1 Bachelors</b>
<b>Did Not Meet Acceptable Standard</b> N = 8	<b>5.9 years</b> (5.7, not including most experienced teacher)	<b>12.0 years</b> (8.6, not including most experienced teacher)	<b>4 Masters</b> <b>3 Bachelors</b>

<sup>1</sup> Observation of a lesson by the ELA CPDT.

<sup>2</sup> Includes an observation of the Writing Specialist.

<sup>3</sup> Observation of the Reading Specialist modeling a lesson.

<sup>4</sup> Observation of a lesson by the Math CPDP.

In pinpointing the underlying causes for the discrepant levels of instructional quality at Brightwood, the Team concluded that the school is currently experiencing the effects of a history of unstable instructional leadership. It needs to be noted here that the current principal, now in her second year, is making a bold and committed effort to stabilize the school but she admits that the leadership challenges are at times daunting. Her greatest challenge is to build a professional culture in the school where excellent instructional practice is the norm. It was apparent that not only had past leaders failed to establish high expectations for student achievement but also for teacher performance. The school has employed five principals in the last six years and, over that same period of time, more than half of the instructional staff has turned over. Teachers who endured through these years described the school as “chaos,” with each principal bringing “different philosophies, ideas and expectations” and a feeling of “not knowing what to expect next.”

Based on the Panel Review Report and interviews from stakeholders during the Fact Finding visit, the Team believes that many of the instruction and curriculum obstacles observed are still inherently tied to the failure to create and sustain a sound framework of leadership at Brightwood and are obvious in the following key areas:

- The difficulty noted by district curriculum leaders, teachers and CPDT of uniformly and consistently covering all of the mandated ELA and math units in the curriculum
- The insufficient use of abundant and highly informative data to clarify the explicit learning needs of students
- The disconnect between the regular needs-based professional development provided by the district and the school's ability to successfully translate that training into changed classroom practice

Along with these challenges, it is essential to identify some of the strengths that currently exist within the area of curriculum and instruction at the Brightwood School.

- Exemplary instruction is happening in about one third of the classrooms. Clearly, this represents a strength that can be built upon to address weak instruction.
- The district-level curriculum materials provide a clear, comprehensive and appropriate framework for instruction (e.g., Pupil Progression Policy, Math Instructional Guides, Code of Conduct Manual, The District Reading Plan, The District ELL Plan, Step-Up Springfield)
- The district professional development initiative for CPDT's is extensive and targets instructional weaknesses specific to individual schools.
- Brightwood's recent selection as a "Reading First School" provides an opportunity for the entire school to rally around a program that has been shown to improve student reading performance.
- The recent increase in interest, visibility and support from district leadership with regard to issues related to curriculum, instruction and assessment has given the faculty hope that Brightwood will get the help and attention it needs.
- Evidence from the 2004-2005 quarterly Step-Up assessments of 4<sup>th</sup> graders in ELA and Math indicates that recent attention to filling the gaps in performance identified through the School Improvement Plan process may have already stimulated an increase in student performance (see Tables 2 and 3). Though this example represents only a small slice of what the district and the school need to do with the wealth of achievement data they have at their disposal, it indicates that they are poised to make more thoughtful use of data to drive instruction.
- The current Step-up Springfield initiative has a focus on the analysis of student performance data as the centerpiece of its campaign to improve student achievement. The Efficacy Institute's Self-Directed Improvement System (SDIS) has been adopted as part of their campaign. Four Brightwood teachers and the principal have already received the training, with others scheduled for training in the fall.
- The current principal, though in the middle of a challenging time of school change, is committed to do her very best to bring needed focus in the areas of curriculum, instruction and assessment. In numerous ways, she has demonstrated keen managerial ability to see what needs to be done for the benefit of students and do it. She has courageously made a number of bold moves that have been applauded by segments of the school staff and questioned by others.
- Teachers in several grade levels have demonstrated a willingness to examine data, student work and discuss curriculum issues.

**Table 2: Fourth Grade Step-Up Math Assessment Fall/Winter 04/05  
(Average percent correct in each math strand)**

	Number Sense	Prob. & Statistics	Pat., Rel. & Alg.	Geometry	Measurement
Step-Up Math - 12/04	18%	19%	31%	14%	15%
Step-Up Math - 3/05	39%	34%	36%	48%	52%

**Table 3: Fourth Grade Step-Up ELA Assessment Fall/Winter 04/05  
(Average percent correct in each ELA Standard)**

	Std. #4	Std. #5	Std. #8	Std. #10	Std. #11	Std. #12	Std. #13	Std. #14	Std. #15
Step-Up ELA - 12/04	N/T	38%	39%	N/T	54%	54%	16%	37%	39%
Step-Up ELA - 3/05	47%	39%	58%	64%	45%	N/T	50%	N/T	N/T

In conclusion, the FFT believes that, in the domain of Curriculum and Instruction, improving student achievement at Brightwood will be largely dependent on creating a school culture where instructional excellence is the norm in all classrooms. The following recommendations are offered towards the achievement of that end.

- Establish a rigorous system of supervision and evaluation that is exercised fairly, consistently and professionally with all faculty and administration. The Organizational Structure and Management section of the report will address this recommendation in more detail.
- Use the Performance Improvement Mapping (P.I.M.) process to dig deeper into the existing assessment data to obtain an even more sophisticated view of the reasons for stalled student achievement. Care should be taken to engage and communicate regularly with the entire faculty and staff along the way.
- Develop a protocol for scrutinizing lesson plans to ensure that the curriculum scope and sequence is being followed and that the instructional time requirements are being met.
- Conduct school-wide discussions about student learning expectations and the elements of rigorous instruction. While this should begin at the SLT level and at PIM sessions, it must ultimately happen with full faculty input. The student grouping process is similarly a crucial topic for faculty analysis and decision.

## II: School Climate

In focus groups, teachers expressed both optimism and frustration regarding the tone and manner of interactions between the staff and administration. The FFT found the morale of the school's professional community to be a key issue of concern. There is an absence of a clear, shared commitment to a common vision for improvement. While negative feelings among some were openly obvious, many also reflected a belief that district and state interventions have produced a sense of seriousness, the expectation of steady leadership and greater support for the school.

During interviews with school and district leadership, the FFT learned that the district currently has an increased awareness that it needs to provide more specific guidelines, expectations and follow-up support as the school develops its improvement plans. In several key areas (ELL, use of student performance data, teacher supervision/evaluation), the work of the school needs to be more closely monitored.

The recent Panel Review Report asserted that the school did not have the capacity to successfully implement the school improvement plan because faculty support for the document was insufficient. Though the Fact Finding Team witnessed some positive developments at Brightwood, it found ample evidence to corroborate the Panel Review Report's findings and conclude that the absence of a shared commitment to a common vision for improvement fosters an unhealthy level of ambiguity at the school – a key factor contributing to the problem of low morale. It was felt that the absence of regular, substantive and focused collegial meeting time was one of the determinants directly linked to low morale and a lack of shared vision. Other prominent components of Brightwood's cultural challenges that contribute to the issue of low morale include:

- The regular substandard performance of some teachers was not effectively nor routinely addressed. As indicated in staff interviews and surveys, this created a sense of animosity and cynicism among faculty about the interest and ability of the district to install and supervise an experienced and strong principal at a school with chronic achievement difficulties.
- Previous schedules contained inequities between teachers and failed to meet mandated district curriculum time allotments.
- During past leadership gaps, segments of the faculty had assumed leadership roles and then were shifted out of those roles with the arrival of the new principal. For example, the decision by the current principal to group students homogeneously has alienated some staff.
- The Responsive Classroom is not applied evenly across the school.
- There exists a perception that unqualified people occupy some positions.

In the course of the interview with the members of the School Leadership Team, there was an acknowledgment that the group itself is deeply divided along philosophical, procedural and policy lines. They recognized that their own divisions reflect the school-wide ambiguity on many issues and that unification needs to take place at many levels. An interview with the SCDM also revealed confusion and frustration among members with regard to its role and function in school improvement efforts.

Despite the existing challenges, it should be recognized that some elements of fundamental importance to the creation of a healthy school climate either already exist at Brightwood or are being established. Clearly, adults in the school care deeply about children and want them to succeed. Well over half of the classroom observations reported an exemplary classroom rapport between teachers and students. While many teachers struggled with instructional methodologies, there was widespread evidence of mutual respect between many students and adults in the school.

Collaboration among staff and communication across grades and programs are beginning to improve. Although in the early stages, there is now greater attention to dialogue related to teaching and learning in both planned and informal ways. Teachers and school leaders indicated a more productive use of Extended Day time to set substantive curriculum, data and instruction agendas. The FFT examined the agenda and minutes of after-school grade level meetings and found merit in a range of meaningful curriculum and assessment topics. Teachers' feedback on the value of professional development initiatives is now regularly solicited. The newly designated PIM team will have far greater teacher representation. Several grade-level teams have begun to voluntarily meet during common planning time to review curriculum issues, student work and instructional practice.

Between the Panel Review conducted in November and the completion of the Fact Finding visit in March, the FFT became aware of the principal's prioritization of critical and immediate changes to improve staff morale and services to students. These include: student placement, scheduling and use of data. The principal's recent redeployment of ESL and special needs personnel to bolster coverage in difficult classroom situations reflects the kind of insightful management decisions contributing to a more hopeful school climate. At the same time, this centralized decision-making style causes stress.

The Team recommends the following actions to improve staff morale.

- Prior to opening school in the fall of 2005, engage the *entire* school community to establish a common commitment to:
  - 1) new and/or revised school mission and vision statements, and a new and/or revised set of values and operating principles
  - 2) a set a goals and an action plan designed to improve school climate and morale. The school's involvement in Step-Up Springfield and the Self Directed Improvement System (SDIS) should be helpful here.
- The school must develop explicit and sound communication channels to provide information and feedback about the PIM process, the work of the SLT and SCDM. Additionally, as the principal cultivates a more inclusive decision-making process, the delegation of leadership roles to teachers on operational subcommittees (e.g. discipline, scheduling, grouping, data analysis) becomes pivotal in morale building and solidifying vision and mission.

### **III: Organizational Structure and Management**

The FFT prioritized three organizational structures that they believed must be more firmly established and better managed to ensure improved student performance at the Brightwood Elementary School:

- 1) A structure for teacher collaboration and planning
- 2) A structure for school-based leadership and decision-making
- 3) A structure for evaluation and supervision of all professional staff

Establishing organizational structures that allow for greater teacher collaboration and planning is an essential step. While recent efforts to find common time for teachers at Brightwood to engage in important dialog about teaching and learning are encouraging, all admit that finding sufficient meeting time is still a major concern. The extended Monday initiative has been a move in the right direction, although time has been borrowed to conduct parent conferences, staff meetings

and professional development. In addition, the existing schedule has teacher planning time built in that is common across grade levels. Occasionally, some teachers voluntarily give up that time to have formal grade level meetings; however, they are under no obligation to do so. Some teachers indicated that the limited quantity of time during the week for collaboration forced rushed interactions that yielded superficial results only.

Organizationally, Brightwood was not able to communicate a coherent or well-coordinated structure for school-based decision making and/or leadership. Though teams were in place with names that would imply such roles (the School Leadership Team – SLT – and the School Council for Decision Making – SCDM), neither group was able to communicate a common purpose nor a common understanding of their responsibilities. Members of the SLT were polled to determine if they felt they operated well as a unified team. Four responded “I’m not sure,” one “sometimes,” and one “no.” The SLT members appeared divided along philosophical, procedural and policy lines.

Members of the SCDM expressed concern about the lack of regular meeting time and lack of input into decisions being made by the principal. They also expressed confusion about the parameters of its role and responsibilities. Focus group interviews with teachers revealed that some teachers felt “powerless” and that they had “no decision-making power with regard to programs” and that they were “told – not asked.” Such sentiments reflect an autocratic style of leadership that seems to have been employed since the new principal’s arrival in an effort to raise school standards. As already mentioned in previous sections of this report, this leadership approach created a rift between the administration and a significant segment of the faculty and contributed to the problem low school morale. At the same time, the FFT recognizes that the new leadership has made some effective decisions. The question remains how leadership can move from making unilateral decisions to a process that creates greater buy-in and unity.

The FFT believes that implementing a system of supervision and evaluation for all professional staff needs to be a top priority at the school. From interviews with teachers, the principal and district leaders, as well as from examination of written documents, it was clear to the FFT that the structures and practices related to the supervision and evaluation of all professional staff were inadequate. During their visit, the FFT discovered that:

- 1) The quality and standards of instruction varied greatly from classroom to classroom.
- 2) Lesson plans were being periodically collected but not evaluated.
- 3) Current written performance evaluation data for teachers that specified strengths and weaknesses and made recommendations for improvement either did not exist or were inadequate.
- 4) A significant number of faculty members (approximately 1/3) expressed concern on the Instructional Staff Survey about the qualifications and skills of some of their colleagues.

Given these facts, it was apparent to the FFT that a rigorous evaluation process needed to be instituted in order to benchmark the degree to which standards of professional practice were being met by the Brightwood staff and to inform professional development.

The FFT offers the following recommendations within the Organizational Structure and Management domain.

### **Teacher Collaboration and Planning**

- Consider the school-wide priorities for groups who need to meet (whole staff, grade level teams, student service teams, etc.), the minimum time required of each group, and then schedule time available.
- Solicit creative scheduling solutions from the entire staff and include interested members on a schedule building committee or task force.

### **School-Based Leadership and Decision Making**

- Build the capacity and effectiveness of the SLT and the SCDM by: building the teams' purpose around the realization of the schools' mission, vision and values; developing consensus around the philosophies, programs and services offered by the school; and clearly defining the roles, responsibilities and limits of authority of each team.
- The district leadership needs to support the school's effort to build Brightwood's capacity to create successful school-based decision making and leadership structures by providing the necessary resources (e.g., time, training and guidance) and also assisting in the development of a seamless organizational structure focused on improving student performance.
- Provisions need to be made to provide faculty and staff with opportunities for input into the decisions that impact their work through the teacher collaboration and planning structures.

### **Evaluation and Supervision**

- Establish separate protocols for the purposes of: 1) *evaluating* teachers and administrators – assessing the degree to which standards of professional practice are being met; and 2) *supervising* teachers and administrators – supporting, guiding and developing professional practice. There is an urgent need to employ a rigorous evaluation system with all faculty and administration to bring professional practice up to acceptable standards as quickly as possible. Evidence of substandard practice needs to be identified and corrective action needs to be employed. At the same time, exemplary practice needs to be identified and rewarded.

## **IV. Leadership and Planning**

It was evident to the team that the principal possesses the passion and determination to make a difference by using her strong management and organizational abilities but by her own admission as an inexperienced principal, she has much to learn about becoming a strong instructional leader. Key areas for improvement identified by the team include the principal's ability to: 1) collaborate effectively with faculty and other groups in school decision-making processes; 2) analyze and monitor student progress using a variety of assessment data; and, 3) evaluate and supervise the effectiveness of teachers' instructional practice.

One year and four months ago, the current principal was hired at Brightwood to assume the responsibilities of her first principalship. The challenges she inherited (described throughout this report) were significant. The FFT agreed that the skills and abilities of even the most experienced school leader would be tested in taking on this assignment – instructional practice was weak in most classrooms, no standards for accountability were being employed, the staff morale was low, the physical environment in the building was not inviting, no meaningful growth in student

performance had occurred in years, and the Department of Education had intervened. Despite these challenges, it became apparent to the FFT that, with the support of the district leadership, the principal is determined to bring about change in the school. Her forceful leadership style has been greeted with relief by some and with indignation from others – a dynamic that contributed to the challenge of low morale described earlier in the report.

Her efforts have led to a number of important school improvements. She can be credited with improving the school's physical environment from a tired and uninviting space to a more vibrant space with a welcoming feel. She has made major strides in creating a schedule that meets instructional time requirements, maximizes use of human resources and provides common grade level planning time. Drawing from her background in ESL, she instituted the Sheltered English Immersion program, which was met with resistance from some due to philosophical reasons around the impact of homogeneous grouping. She made clear to the team that the motive behind her directive style was to gain consistency and control over a school that had been impaired by past leadership instabilities.

A key challenge for the principal is to achieve her goal of becoming more collaborative. While the FFT believes that historical events surrounding leadership have exacerbated the school's challenges, it also believes that a significant cause for the lack of collaborative structures at Brightwood can be directly attributed to the style of leadership required during the last year and four months to bring order and new direction to the school. The last section addressed the need for an organizational structure that promotes school-based leadership and shared decision making. The current principal will bear much of the responsibility for shaping this structure since she holds key roles within the SLT, SCDM, PIM and SDIS.

An important role of an instructional leader is to use assessment data to monitor student and school progress and set goals for the future. Brightwood has plenty of assessment data at its disposal, including the MCAS, the Step-Up Springfield Assessments and a wide variety of school-generated assessment data. The progress being made on use of data is due largely to the efforts of district personnel and the work of Brightwood's math CPDT. It became clear to the FFT, however, that only a fraction of the data were actually being used; very few professional staff had a good grasp on how to organize and analyze data. By her own admission, the principal is struggling, as well, to get command over data. Having a command over the knowledge and utilization of data to drive instruction is an essential requirement for today's instructional leader. Being able to communicate confidently and intelligently about all aspects of the assessment process will help to build trust and credibility and to move the school toward its student performance goals.

The ability to skillfully evaluate and supervise teacher instruction is another important leadership quality that the current principal must strive to achieve. During the FFT's work at Brightwood, it became evident that effective evaluation and supervision practices were not in place. Several key sources of evidence supported the team's conclusion. When asked for documentation of recent classroom evaluations, the team was given a folder with approximately 40 one-page classroom observation checklist sheets. All of them rated teacher performance as acceptable or above; little or no constructive feedback was offered. Information gained during teacher focus groups revealed that current and past performance evaluations were sporadic and of little or no use. An Assistant Superintendent acknowledged the weakness and indicated that a new evaluation

protocol had been developed but was being held up by the collective bargaining process. It should be stated here that efforts to engage the principal and district specialists in periodic walk-through observations have been somewhat successful in providing teachers with helpful feedback and also giving the principal practice at identifying and recording elements of good instruction.

Listed below are the FFT's recommendations for the establishment of stable and effective leadership at the Brightwood School.

- The district leadership should continue to connect weekly with the principal for mentoring and coaching.
- Critically review the structures related to the management, leadership and delivery of the professional development program to identify the root causes of the disconnect between professional development efforts and what is actually being translated into practice.
- The district leadership should continue to make regular visits to Brightwood and engage in walk-through observations with the principal as a source of support and encouragement for the principal, teachers and students.

## **Conclusion**

Developing consistency in the quality of instruction needs to be one of the primary targets of the improvement efforts at Brightwood. The lack of stability in leadership has made it difficult for the school to adopt a clear vision and clear standards for effective teaching. Effective protocols for supervision and evaluation do not exist. Though appropriate curriculum frameworks and ambitious professional development programs are in place, the lack of coordination and follow through at the classroom level has not ensured that professional development leads to real changes in classroom practice.

Improvement of school climate and morale are essential to Brightwood's future. Though some signs of improvement were evident through the course of the visit, low morale was still a significant concern. In order to improve morale, it is imperative that the school community members come to an agreement on their purpose and direction and on the methods and programs that will take them there. In the process, it is also imperative that they develop a list and agree upon the core professional values and/or operational principles that will guide their actions.

**APPENDIX A**

**MA DOE ATA FACT FINDING REVIEW  
BRIGHTWOOD SCHOOL, SPRINGFIELD MASSACHUSETTS  
FEBRUARY 7-9, MARCH 8, 2005**

**FEBRUARY 8, 2005 DAY 2: CORE TEAM AND PRACTITIONERS**

	<b>Core Team</b>	<b>Practitioners A B</b>
7:30 – 9:00 AM	Introductions to principal, school tour. Additional focus areas for class visits, set up workspace, meet students to be shadowed	
9:00 AM – 12:00 PM	Meet with school leadership, planning team (SLT), Math/ELA CDPT, Writing Resource Specialist, ELL Coordinator, School Support Specialist	<b>A. Shadow Student/Classroom Observations B. Shadow Student/Classroom Observations</b>
12:00 – 1:00 PM	Lunch	Lunch
1:00 – 3:00 PM	Meet with Deputy Superintendent, Read/Math/ELA/ ELL and Sped. Directors	<b>A. Classroom Observations B. Classroom Observations</b>
3:00 – 5:00 PM	Debrief with practitioners - Construct responses to domains 1 (and 2)	

**FEBRUARY 9, 2005 DAY 3: CORE TEAM AND PRACTITIONERS**

	<b>Core Team</b>	<b>Practitioners A B..C</b>
8:00 – 8:30 AM	Review schedule, assign tasks	
8:30 – 9:00 AM	Share debrief summary with principal	Review Day 2 observation notes for trends, strengths, needs. Prepare for day 3 observations
9:00 AM – 12:00 PM	Focus Group Interviews	<b>A. Classroom Observations B. Classroom Observations</b>
12:00 – 1:00 PM	Lunch	Lunch
1:00 – 3:00 PM	Debrief observations-refine/ revise responses to questions for domains 1 and 2- Practitioners depart	
3:00 – 5:00 PM	Debrief focus groups and interviews; formulate responses domains 3/4	

**MARCH 8, 2005 DAY 4 CORE TEAM ONLY**

<b>Core Team</b>	
8:00-8:30 AM	Arrival, review schedule of remaining interviews, class visits
8:30 – 9:00 AM	Share debrief summary with principal
9:00- 12:00	9:15-10:00 SCDM 10:00-10:30 Student Focus Group SDIS 10:30-12:00 Follow-up interviews SLT members
12:00 – 3:00	Lunch/Classroom Visits/Continue to Develop Findings
3:00- 4:00 PM	Meet with Deputy Superintendent and School Support Specialist, Directors and principal to report team's responses to protocol questions

**APPENDIX B****Team Members**

Nick Feldman	SchoolWorks	Chair
Thomas Harvey	SchoolWorks	Core Team Member
James Devine	Assistant Superintendent Chicopee, MA	Team Member
Anne Lane	School Principal Weymouth, MA	Team Member