

REPORT OF FACT FINDING REVIEW Massachusetts Department of Education

Springfield Academy Springfield Public Schools

Executive Summary

A Fact Finding (FF) team assembled by the Massachusetts Department of Education spent three days at Springfield Academy (February 1-3, 2005) reviewing documents and conducting classroom observations and interviews with school-wide and district personnel. As one of the alternative schools in the Springfield Public Schools, Springfield Academy (SPAC) possesses a unique student demographic and a high rate of transience. Of the students assigned to SPAC, 97 percent are special education students, with the large majority possessing social and emotional disabilities that preclude them from being placed in a less restrictive environment. As reported by school administration, the average student enrollment at SPAC is less than 150 days. Stabilizing student behavior is the primary focus at Springfield Academy. Academic planning documents and other guides, such as the School Improvement Plan (SIP), are not integral components of the school's current efforts to focus on low student academic performance. The FF team found significant deficiencies in the school's academic program, including an inadequate quality of instructional practices, inconsistent curriculum implementation and a leadership and organizational structure that is not well defined and, therefore, not likely to effectively support the necessary improvement initiatives at the school in its current state. Besides identifying reasons for low levels of student achievement, the task of the FF team was to identify prospects for improvement that Springfield Academy can build upon as they begin their improvement planning process. The Team's key findings span across four domains: Curriculum and Instruction, School Climate, Organizational Structure and Management, and Leadership and Planning.

I Curriculum and Instruction

The FF team identified two key overlapping issues that have been influential in the low student achievement rates at Springfield Academy that specifically pertain to curriculum and instruction:

- Inadequate quality of instructional practices school-wide
- Inconsistent implementation of a curriculum across grade levels

Following 22 classroom visits, numerous interviews and an in-depth review of school-wide documents, the team concluded these two issues are major factors in the school's poor academic performance based on the following evidence:

- Limited knowledge among instructional staff as to how to implement effective, differentiated instructional practices and how to utilize required curriculum documents to guide teaching and student learning
- Minimal use of meaningful, continuous assessment data to identify student learning needs and inform instructional practices
- Inadequate instructional oversight to monitor the implementation of the curriculum and assess the quality of teaching

The FF team identified several areas of priority focus that should be considered as Springfield Academy begins its improvement planning process.

- Track, monitor and provide training opportunities in special education service delivery to school-wide staff.
- Develop a systematic method for frequent and regular monitoring of classroom practices that provides feedback to instructional staff in order to begin to build an academic foundation rooted in teaching and learning. The purpose of the system is two-fold:
 - To ensure implementation and proper use of district curriculum documents
 - To guide instructional strategies that are consistent with best practice and appropriate for the diverse and changing learning needs of the school's student population
- Create meaningful, individualized Student Success Plans to track progress and identify academic strengths and weaknesses consistent with the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP).

II School Climate

The school climate at Springfield Academy reflects a lack of a shared vision and commitment to student academic achievement, which is evidenced by:

- Expectations that are focused on the behavioral issues, rather than the academic ability, of Springfield Academy students.
- The lack of a structure for common planning time within the school day, significantly limiting opportunities for collaboration among staff to discuss the academic and behavioral programming for a student body with significant needs that are constantly changing.

In order to achieve a unified school-wide vision that reflects the importance of student academic achievement, the FF team recommends the following as Springfield Academy begins its improvement planning process:

- Revisit the school's mission so that it reflects a dual and balanced focus on both academic success and behavioral stability.
- Provide opportunities for members of the Springfield Academy community to collaborate frequently across grade levels and disciplines to ensure the consistent implementation of strategies to address both academics and behavior in ways that are consistent with best practice.

III Organizational Structure and Management

Springfield Academy does not possess a coordinated management system and, as a result, personnel school-wide are *not* held accountable for the complete, proper and quality implementation of special education supports. This factor greatly limits the school's ability to provide required services. As evidence, the team identified these conditions:

- The quality of student Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs) is insufficient to guide appropriate program (academic and behavioral) implementation and decision-making processes.
- A system of monitoring implementation of and adherence to student IEPs is inconsistent, incomplete, and not effectively carried out.

- Quarterly progress reports as required by student IEPs are not consistently reported in terms of measurable goals that are aligned with student performance goals.
- Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs) are not completed in a timely manner.

The lack of an organized system of oversight and monitoring of school-wide programs, which fails to hold personnel responsible for quality and proper implementation of services, is of serious concern to the FF team. The FF team recommends two interrelated actions to begin to build a sound foundation and address the current deficiencies in the organization and management structure at Springfield Academy:

- Conduct an audit of the current programs in place to identify strengths that can be built upon and critical weaknesses that must be addressed during improvement planning.
- Assign personnel with appropriate skills to the essential task of coordinating the services and programs at Springfield Academy as they are intended to be utilized:
 - Ensure sufficient time within the school day for responsible personnel to complete the required tasks.
 - Hold personnel assigned to these tasks accountable for the quality of implementation.

IV Leadership and Planning

The current leadership at Springfield Academy is characterized by a dysfunctional relationship between school administrators and an instructional leadership configuration that is ineffective, greatly reducing the school's ability to provide a sound academic program. This is evidenced by:

- Significantly limited shared decision-making processes involving school leaders, in part due to lack of clarity in the definition of roles, responsibilities and lines of authority.
- Positions designated as instructional leadership (i.e., Collaborative Professional Development Teachers, Reading Specialist, Department Chair) have a varied understanding of their role/s as instructional leaders, including methods for supporting instruction.
- A widespread gap among the staff within the school and across the district to identify personnel responsible for instructional oversight and compliance with special education regulations.
- The lack of a coordinated program-wide system for supplying frequent, formative feedback to instructional staff.

As Springfield Academy begins to focus efforts on improvement planning, the FF team identified two areas of priority focus to assist the school in increasing the current leadership capacities and formulating initiatives to address academic planning:

- Construct and disseminate clear, concise definitions of the roles of school and instructional leadership, including their respective functions and oversight responsibilities. The district is responsible for overseeing the conduct of these roles and assuring that individuals are accountable for the performance of their duties.
- Implement a program-wide system for collecting information on classroom practices and the use of instructional strategies that can be used to inform professional development activities and guide the ongoing planning and implementation of improvement initiatives.

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 in which student's 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:

1. Does the school under review have a sound plan for improving student performance?
2. 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 which 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.

School Profile

Springfield Academy Profile

Enrollment

Springfield Academy is one of the 47 public schools located in Springfield. The school serves students from grades K-12, and contains three separate programs. The Emergency Services Program (ESP) provides extended evaluation and assessment services for students suspected of having emotional/behavioral disabilities. The Assessment Center (AC) provides intervention services for district-wide students under long-term suspension for serious violations of the discipline code. Finally, the Long Term Program provides an academic setting with therapeutic support for students with emotional/behavioral disabilities.

Over the last four years, enrollment at this school has tripled, from 66 in 2001 to 193 as of October 1 of this school year. There have also been small, yet noticeable, changes in student demographics.

Between 2001 and 2004, the proportion of White students attending Springfield Academy declined from 36 to 24 percent, while the percentage of Black students rose from 20 to 30 percent. This year, 46 percent of students are reported as Hispanics, a slight increase over the 42 percent represented in 2001. Asian students, who accounted for 2 percent in 2001, this year account for 1 percent. In 2004, 90 percent of Springfield Academy's students were from low-income families. Eight percent of the students in 2004 are reported as having a primary language other than English, but none of the school's students are reported as being Limited English Proficient. This school year, 98 percent of students are reported to be receiving special education services, which is an increase of 30 percent over last year.

In 2004, Springfield Academy registered an attendance rate of 84.8 percent, with students absent 20.4 days on average. The school's retention rate was 8 percent in 2003, the last year for which this data are available. No out-of-school or in-school suspensions were reported; the dropout rate for grades 9-12 in 2003 was 18 percent.

Staffing

The 2004-2005 Springfield Academy staffing report indicates that the school is composed of 3 administrators, 1 guidance counselor and 13 adjustment counselors, 1 school psychologist, and 41 teachers. Approximately 30 educators at this school have taught there for three or fewer years. All but 6 staff members are certified in the subject that they teach.

MCAS Overview

Students at Springfield Academy are assessed in grades 3, 4, 7, and 10 in English language arts (ELA) and in grades 4, 6, 8, and 10 in mathematics. Since 2001, the school has not been found to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in either ELA or mathematics. In the school's Cycle III End-of-Cycle (2003-2004) and Mid-Cycle (2003) AYP Reports, the school failed to make AYP in ELA and mathematics in the aggregate and for the two reported subgroups: Special Education and Free/Reduced Price Lunch.¹

Due to the transitory and expanding nature of Springfield Academy's population, MCAS results are not available for all grade levels and subject areas for the past five years. Further, due to the small sample sizes tested at all grade levels, a degree of caution is required in examining the school's MCAS results. The data available are described below.

Student Performance in English Language Arts

GRADE 3

All Students

The performance of regular education students in grade 3 Reading has improved during the two years of data available. In 2003, 36 percent of students performed at the Needs Improvement level and 55 percent at Warning. In 2004, the percentage of Needs Improvement students increased to 67 percent, while the percentage of Warning students decreased to 33 percent. In each of the two years, however, 11 students only were assessed.

Special Education

As described above, 98% of the Springfield Academy student body currently receives Special Education services; as such, MCAS results for this subgroup reflect those for all students.

Limited English Proficient

Fewer than 10 limited English proficient students were assessed in each of the two years for which data are available (2003 & 2004).

GRADE 4

All Students

At the grade 4 level in ELA, only one year of data are available. In 2004, 19 students were assessed. Of these, 37 percent scored in the Needs Improvement category and 63 percent scored in the Warning category.

¹ In accordance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001, student performance is disaggregated by the following subgroups: Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Free/Reduced Price Lunch, African-American/Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native American, and White. A minimum of 40 students (or 5% of the total number of students assessed, whichever is greater) per subgroup is required to issue a statistically sound rating or determination of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The subgroups meeting the minimum sample size at Springfield Academy in 2004 were Special Education and Free/Reduced Price Lunch (for both subject areas).

Special Education

As described above, 98% of the Springfield Academy student body currently receives Special Education services; as such, MCAS results for this subgroup reflect those for all students.

Limited English Proficient

Fewer than 10 limited English proficient students were assessed in each of the two years for which data are available (2003 & 2004).

GRADE 7**All Students**

At the grade 7 level in ELA, four years of data are available; these data show a trend toward improvement and away from Warning/Failing. In 2004, 8 percent of students scored in the Proficient range, 46 percent in Needs Improvement and 46 percent in Warning. In 2001, only 12 percent of students scored in the Needs Improvement range and 88 percent scored in Warning range. Between 20 and 24 students were assessed in each of these four years.

Special Education

As described above, 98% of the Springfield Academy student body currently receives Special Education services; as such, MCAS results for this subgroup reflect those for all students.

Limited English Proficient

Fewer than 10 limited English proficient students were assessed in each of the two years for which data are available (2003 & 2004).

GRADE 10**All Students**

At the grade 10 level in ELA, only two years of data are available; these data reflect no substantial change. In 2004, 36 percent of students scored in Needs Improvement and 64 percent in Failing. In 2003, only 33 percent of students scored in the Needs Improvement range and 67 percent scored in the Failing range. Only 14 - 15 students were assessed in each of these two years.

Special Education

As described above, 98% of the Springfield Academy student body currently receives Special Education services; as such, MCAS results for this subgroup reflect those for all students.

Limited English Proficient

Fewer than 10 limited English proficient students were assessed in each of the two years for which data are available (2003 & 2004).

Student Performance in Mathematics

GRADE 4

All Students

At the grade 4 level in mathematics, only two years of data are available. In 2004, 20 students were assessed; in 2003, 9 students were assessed. In 2004, 10 percent scored in the Needs Improvement category and 90 percent scored in the Warning category. These percentages were similar in 2003.

Special Education

As described above, 98% of the Springfield Academy student body currently receives Special Education services; as such, MCAS results for this subgroup reflect those for all students.

Limited English Proficient

Fewer than 10 limited English proficient students were assessed in each of the two years for which data are available (2003 & 2004).

GRADE 6

All Students

At the grade 6 level in mathematics, four years of data are available; these data show a slight improvement trend, but are skewed by the small sample sizes. In 2004, 0 percent of students scored in the Proficient range, 22 percent in Needs Improvement and 78 percent in Warning. In 2003, 9 percent of students scored in the Proficient range, 0 percent in the Needs Improvement range and 91 percent in Warning. In 2001, 100 percent of students scored in the Warning range. Between 11 and 17 students were assessed in each of these four years.

Special Education

As described above, 98% of the Springfield Academy student body currently receives Special Education services; as such, MCAS results for this subgroup reflect those for all students.

Limited English Proficient

Fewer than 10 limited English proficient students were assessed in each of the two years for which data are available (2003 & 2004).

GRADE 8

All Students

At the grade 8 level in mathematics, five years of data are available; these data show slight variation, but are skewed by the small sample sizes. In 2004, 14 percent of students scored in Needs Improvement and 86 percent in Warning/Failing. In 2003, 100 percent scored in the Warning/Failing range. In 2002, 26 percent of students scored in Needs Improvement and 74 percent in Warning/Failing. Between 19 and 29 students were assessed in each of these five years.

Special Education

As described above, 98% of the Springfield Academy student body currently receives Special Education services; as such, MCAS results for this subgroup reflect those for all students.

Limited English Proficient

Fewer than 10 limited English proficient students were assessed in each of the two years for which data are available (2003 & 2004).

GRADE 10**All Students**

At the grade 10 level in mathematics, three years of data are available; these data reflect a slight improvement trend, but are skewed by the small sample sizes. In 2004, 21 percent of students scored in the Proficient range, 29 percent of students scored in Needs Improvement and 50 percent in Failing. In 2003, 11 percent of students scored in the Needs Improvement range and 89 percent scored in the Failing range. Between 11 and 18 students were assessed in each of these three years.

Special Education

As described above, 98% of the Springfield Academy student body currently receives Special Education services; as such, MCAS results for this subgroup reflect those for all students.

Limited English Proficient

Fewer than 10 limited English proficient students were assessed in each of the two years for which data are available (2003 & 2004).

Key Domains of Inquiry**I: Curriculum and Instruction**

The Panel Review of Springfield Academy's improvement initiatives, conducted in November 2004, indicated a school-wide belief that stabilizing student behavior is the primary focus and that academic achievement is secondary. The Panel Review also concluded that, although SPAC has developed a comprehensive School Improvement Plan (SIP) that contains the essential elements of a plan, the document did not adequately provide logical connections between the identified weaknesses. School-wide, staff did not believe that the documented learning gaps were the primary factors influencing low student performance but rather, the school's unique student population and their identified behavioral disabilities are the key factors leading to poor academic achievement. In the school's own analysis presented in the SIP, they identified teachers' inability to differentiate instruction, lack of training for teachers in the use of the district scope and sequence, and the lack of assessment (specifically in reading) as some of the reasons for current learning gaps. While these factors are reasonable explanations for poor instructional quality, the FF team found little evidence to indicate that Springfield Academy has made progress toward diminishing these critical gaps. During the in-depth Fact Finding visit, the limited use of the SIP as a guiding document and a minimal focus on academic programming became very apparent. Two critical deficiencies – the inadequate quality of instructional

practices and the inconsistent implementation of the curriculum – were identified as overarching characteristics of Springfield Academy classrooms.

During the three-day visit to Springfield Academy, the FF team observed 22 classroom lessons, spanning all academic subjects and grade levels (K-12) that make up the school's long-term program and also included some classes in the school's emergency services program. In a few instances, a classroom was observed more than once. Based on the Department of Education (DOE) observation rubric, the team rated various elements of classroom instruction on a scale ranging from one (*does not meet an acceptable standard*) to three (*exemplifies good practice*) with a score of two suggesting the instructional element of interest *meets an acceptable standard*. The results are summarized in the table below in both number and (percentages). Across the classrooms observed, at least two-thirds possessed instructional practices that were judged by the FF team to be of an *unacceptable standard*.

Elements of Classroom practice	Does not meet an acceptable standard (1)	Meets an acceptable standard (2)	Exemplifies good practice (3)
Clear lesson objectives	14/22 (64%)	6/22 (27%)	2/22 (9%)
Instructional Methodology/Formative Assessment	17/22 (77%)	3/22 (14%)	2/22 (9%)
Expectations for student learning	14/22 (64%)	7/22 (31%)	1/22 (5%)

Clear lesson objectives

Objectives rated as substandard failed to set forth a clear explanation of the lesson's purpose. In these cases, observers noted that students were unable to respond to instruction in a manner that indicated an understanding of the desired learning outcome or the purpose of the lesson activity.

Instructional Methodology/Formative Assessment

Observers characterized instruction primarily as whole-group and teacher-directed, which included some modeling, but rarely did teachers ask probing questions to assess for student understanding. Use of data to drive instruction was not evident.

Expectations for student learning

Expectations for student learning were described by Team members as undifferentiated and varying in rigor, even though the largest class observed had nine students only and most had the assistance of a paraprofessional. Differentiated instruction and clear, individualized student learning expectations are fundamental to special education. However, the instruction observed (as described above) does not emulate best practice and has been a key factor in the low achievement rates among students at Springfield Academy.

Beyond the limited quality of instructional practices at Springfield Academy, the consistent use of a curriculum – in both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics – was not evident. Interviews conducted with SPAC staff indicated great variability in use and understanding of curriculum documents. Most teachers did not reference district curriculum guides, such as the

ELA Scope and Sequence, Mathematics Instructional Guide, Teacher Resource Packets or the *District Reading Plan* as relevant to their planning of instruction. The most common response to FF team queries regarding the source of the curriculum in use suggested the textbook - “I follow the Harcourt series” or “I’m just following the math program” – but staff could not elaborate further. Some teachers and staff members identified as instructional leaders in the building also had difficulty recalling the name of textbooks in use. Classroom observations corroborated these suggestions, indicating a heavy reliance on worksheets and textbooks as the content of instruction. In some cases, progress indicators that aligned with the Frameworks were evident in the instructional content of the lesson, but it was unclear that these indicators aligned with district pacing guides or how they were used to accommodate the diverse learning needs of Springfield Academy students. In other cases, it was clear that progress indicators were not used at all. As one staff member stated, “I don’t use benchmarks, I won’t kid you.”

A coordinated system for review and use of continuous assessment data to identify student learning needs (and thereby informing instructional practices) is not currently in place at Springfield Academy. When asked about assessments, SPAC staff indicated the Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA), the Slosson and the newly implemented district assessments – “Step Up Springfield” – have all been administered. Teachers at the elementary level suggested that student DRA scores were used to level student reading groups at the beginning of the year, but ongoing use of the DRA was not apparent. The Reading Specialist could not articulate how data was used once it was received by the district, claiming, “I’m not an evaluator. My role is to give help to those who want it.” It is unclear how assessment data is being used to indicate achievement levels, monitor progress once students are enrolled at Springfield Academy, or assess the effectiveness of instructional practices at the school. It is the judgment of the FF team that the absence of a meaningful assessment system, coupled with a lack of knowledge among staff members on how to make use of assessment information, directly impacts the quality of instruction and the ability of staff to consistently implement a curriculum across grade levels.

Though the lack of instructional leadership at Springfield Academy will be addressed in detail later in this report (See Domains III and IV), its absence is also critical to mention in this Domain, as limited monitoring of teaching practices has a direct influence on the quality of instruction and the implementation of curriculum at the classroom level. Springfield Academy does not currently have an infrastructure in place to effectively oversee instruction and, as a result, teaching practices are of insufficient quality and the use of district curriculum guides is inconsistent. These factors have likely contributed to the low student performance rates at the school.

As Springfield Academy begins its improvement planning efforts, the FF team recommends the following actions - at both the school and district level - to address the current inadequacies in instruction and curriculum implementation.

- *Track, monitor and provide training opportunities in special education service delivery to school-wide staff.* District personnel indicated a training module that is available to staff existed, and results in a designation of “special education qualified.” This could be highly beneficial to personnel with little experience, as SPAC reports a high staff turnover rate. According to the Staff Data Report provided by the DOE, six staff members (out of a total of

39) had left the school since the November Panel Review and 20 out of the 39 instructional staff members were not certified in special education. Though some of these instructional positions might not require certification by law, participation in training is likely to have positive influence on school-wide teaching practices because the staff almost exclusively service children with special needs.

- *Develop a systematic method for regular monitoring of classroom practices, which includes ongoing feedback to staff and is rooted in high quality teaching and learning.* While implementation of this system must occur at the school level, some responsibility resides at the district level to verify that monitoring of instruction is occurring and that administrators are providing appropriate, formative feedback. This system should focus on two primary elements:
 - *Ensure consistent implementation and proper use of curriculum documents.* The district provides curriculum guides across grade levels and subject areas that are linked to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and provide pacing schedules and options for instructional content. Use of a consistent district curriculum is especially critical in a school setting that experiences high student transience within the Springfield Public Schools. Part of the rationale behind district-wide guides is that students continue to experience the same curriculum regardless of school placement.
 - *Promote use of instructional strategies that are consistent with best practice and appropriate for the diverse and changing learning needs of the school's student population.*
- *Create meaningful Individualized Student Success Plans to track progress and identify academic strengths and weaknesses consistent with the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP).* The FF team was provided with Individualized Student Success Plans (ISSP) intended to document achievement data across years, indicate academic strengths and weaknesses and include strategies for academic support at both the school and district levels. However, of the ISSPs reviewed by the Team, most of the plans noted achievement data in raw scores, which is meaningless to an untrained observer, areas of academic strength and weakness had not been identified and support strategies were vague (i.e., special education). Though the foundation is in place for use of ISSPs, Springfield Academy has yet to fully implement this initiative. Once complete, Individualized Student Success Plans could be used to provide staff with a comprehensive, easy-to-use profile of student learning needs.

Instructional inadequacies are widespread at Springfield Academy and are compounded by the inconsistent use of a curriculum. Both of these elements are critical to improving student performance. Increased focus on curriculum, instruction and other practices associated with implementing a sound academic program at SPAC will be addressed throughout this report.

II: School Climate

Because the student population at Springfield Academy possesses significant social and emotional disabilities, stabilization of behavior is the predominate focus. Attention to the academic program is limited, resulting in a school climate that reflects a lack of a shared vision and commitment to academic achievement.

The intent of this finding is not to diminish the importance of behavior stabilization, as this is an essential component of Springfield Academy's programming. Students are enrolled at SPAC because of limited success in a less restrictive environment and/or behavior problems that manifest as a result of a disability. Therefore, stabilizing behavior is an ongoing task at SPAC. The FF team acknowledges the importance of providing a stable environment for this student population, which was well-established in interviews, focus groups and document reviews. However, the SPAC community strongly correlates the reduction of behavior problems with present and future student successes, with limited focus on academic achievement. An overall conclusion of the Panel Review indicated a school-wide belief that student social/emotional needs impede efforts to focus on academics. Expectations for student performance at Springfield Academy are rooted in behavioral instability rather than in recognizing and building academic ability, as evidenced in the staff survey, interviews and the School Improvement Plan (SIP).

When asked about the most significant cause of low student performance on the DOE Instructional Staff Survey, 61 percent of respondents (n=38) indicated behavior disruptions and/or social emotional disabilities. In interviews and focus groups with school staff, when asked about reasons for low student performance, the FF team repeatedly heard that "students are not emotionally available to learn at many times." An interview with one member of the school's leadership team described the overarching belief at Springfield Academy as "take it easy on them, they have an emotional disorder."

Consistent with the needs of its student population, the Springfield Academy SIP possesses "all content" objectives, to address the school-wide goal of stabilizing behavior. Student learning and instructional objectives are specific, and appear to be based on an analysis of student weaknesses. Upon further review, however, the evidence supplied in the SIP to inform the causal analysis is primarily rooted in student disability. Appendix 10 of the SIP states, "Students are unable to engage/participate in classroom activities due to:

- Mental health issues
- 95% of students have IEPs
- 75% of students take medication daily."

While these descriptions of Springfield Academy students are accurate, they do not reflect any intellectual limitation that necessarily prevents attainment of high academic standards. There are many indicators to suggest that awareness of student emotional disabilities limit staff expectations for high academic performance at Springfield Academy. However, this expectation is inconsistent with measured ability, as the majority of the student population does not have cognitive impairments. As indicated in Appendix 10 of the SIP, 80 percent of students' IEPs, "show the primary disability to be emotional." This was corroborated by the school's psychologist, who indicated that a small percentage only of the students who enroll at SPAC have significant cognitive deficits. School-wide expectations that are rooted in the behavioral

instability of Springfield Academy students, rather than academic ability, have contributed to the lack of commitment to, and vision for, high student achievement.

On a positive note, the FF team identified several strengths in the school climate at Springfield Academy. Observations of staff/student interactions throughout the school day – in and out of the classroom – were judged to be positive. Team member observations indicated an overall respectful tone between staff and students. Even in situations when a student presented disrespectfully, communication was individualized and professional in manner.

Secondly, while classroom management was an issue in many classes, ratings on the DOE observation rubric in regard to classroom management indicated at least acceptable, if not exemplary, practices in more than half of the lessons observed (n=22).

Element of Classroom practice	Does not meet an acceptable standard (1)	Meets an acceptable standard (2)	Exemplifies good practice (3)
Classroom Management	10/22 (46%)	6/22 (27%)	6/22 (27%)

Classrooms in which management practices were rated as *does not meet an acceptable standard* failed to present clear behavioral expectations and, as a result, staff did not appear to have sufficient control and could not consistently follow through on stated disciplinary measures. Classroom management practices that were rated as meeting *an acceptable standard* included those in which teachers' expectations were clearer, observers did not witness behavior problems and positive reinforcement was used with some frequency to encourage student self-discipline. Exemplary classroom management practices included explicit behavioral expectations, high rates of positive reinforcement – “I like how you are sitting” – “You’re taking notes first! That’s great!” – “That is really good work... can you tell us how you did that?” - and, as a result, students remained on task and engaged for the duration of the lesson. Of significant interest, the FF team observed a correlation between positive classroom management and quality instructional practices. Lessons with appropriate academic rigor also possessed clear behavioral expectations. Students were rarely off task and learning responses were evident. On the contrary, academic lessons of limited rigor and poor instructional quality resulted in increased disciplinary problems and student participation for short periods of time only. Strong instructional practices that engaged students in academics were correlated with fewer student behavior problems. This indicates that at least some pockets of excellence exist at Springfield Academy that can be used to model best practice.

Besides expectations that are rooted in behavioral instability rather than students' academic ability, the FF team identified another factor that has likely contributed to the narrow focus on behavior at Springfield Academy. Opportunities for planning do not exist within the school day. This significantly limits staff discussions and collaboration to address effective instructional strategies and program implementation. It is the judgment of the FF team that common planning is critical to student success at SPAC. Teachers need regular time to communicate about a student body with high rates of transience and constantly changing social and academic needs.

The SIP identifies inconsistent implementation of the Unified Behavior Management Program (UBMP) as a cause for low student performance (Appendix 10), which was apparent in classroom observations as indicated above. However, time is not available in the school day to plan for consistent implementation. Staff members report some collaboration with school adjustment counselors on behavior programs, but primarily on an individual, ad hoc, informal basis as opposed to systematic, regular co-planning. The Springfield Academy PIM team reported a lack of scheduled planning time, limited collaboration and staff mentoring as a weakness in the school's program and a factor contributing to low student performance. Though some collaboration occurs at Springfield Academy, it is primarily to address behavioral programming and rarely focuses on the academic learning needs of the students. The lack of focus on student academic achievement in conversations between staff responsible for student progress is a major gap in the school's organization.

In order to achieve a unified school-wide vision that reflects the importance of student achievement, the FF team recommends the following as Springfield Academy begins its improvement planning process:

- *Provide opportunities for members of the Springfield Academy community to collaborate frequently across grade levels and disciplines to ensure the consistent implementation of strategies to address both academics and behavior consistent with best practice.* The addition of scheduled, school-wide common planning is critical to shifting the school's focus on the academic student achievement as well as establishing consistent programming for behavioral success. Common planning opportunities should occur within and across grade levels, to assist staff in planning for their students whose academic skills vary greatly within the individual classroom. It is the judgment of the FF team that SPAC has sufficient personnel to design a schedule that allows for common planning within the school day. With the assistance of district personnel, school leadership should re-examine the daily schedule and allot time for common planning in order to increase opportunities for school-wide academic planning collaboration.
- *Revisit the school's mission so that it reflects a dual and balanced focus on both academic success and behavioral stability.* Currently, the school's mission reflects predominant emphasis on the behavioral aspect of the school's program. The mission declares, "The main goal (of the SPAC program) is to have students transition to a less restrictive placement within the public school system." The mission does not prioritize the school's obligation to provide consistent academic programming to allow students to seamlessly transition to another setting. In order to begin to instill a school-wide focus on the importance of student academic achievement, the FF team recommends that the school and the district, by revising the text of the school's mission, develop a common vision among all Springfield Academy staff members that reflects a common vision.

The school climate at Springfield Academy is characterized by a limited commitment to student academic achievement and a heightened focus on behavioral stability. It is the judgment of the FF team that in order for Springfield Academy to carry out its responsibilities as a sound educational institution, the school-wide focus must equally consider academics and behavior and expectations for performance that should be rooted in student ability rather than disability.

III: Organizational Structure and Management

The current infrastructure of Springfield Academy does not function as a coordinated management system. Because personnel school-wide are not held accountable for the complete, proper and quality implementation of special education services, the integration of academic and behavioral programs is significantly limited. It is the judgment of the FF team that this is a critical weakness at Springfield Academy, which requires district assistance and must be addressed if student achievement is to improve.

District leaders describe a comprehensive plan and system for administering special education services across the Springfield Public Schools. However, during the three-day visit to Springfield Academy, the Team found little evidence to suggest that a system for coordination and oversight of special education services exists within the school. This is a major concern in a school whose primary task is to provide a program for students with disabilities. Springfield Academy has a legal, as well as an educational, obligation to adhere to strict regulations in the quality and quantity of services provided, as well as maintaining clear documentation of student services. Student Individualized Education Plans do not appear to be the documents guiding academic programming and instructional decision-making, as required by state and federal regulations. Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs) are not always completed in a timely manner, and coordinated use of these documents is not guiding service delivery. Both the lack of a carefully coordinated and documented system to monitor services to students and the absence of school level adherence to fundamental expectations for serving students with disabilities are influential factors contributing to the low student performance rates at Springfield Academy.

Fundamental to special education are Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), which set forth the service delivery model and explicitly list academic and behavior performance goals intended to best meet the needs of the individual student. The FF team reviewed two IEPs per grade level. IEP performance goals were not consistent with the student achievement levels. For example, one cognitive assessment indicated “(student) is currently working at 4th grade level in math.” The benchmarks cited in the student’s IEP indicate that, in order to demonstrate improvement in mathematics, the student will solve problems involving basic mathematical operations, a learning strand more suited to grades 1-2 rather than to the student’s identified cognitive ability. Furthermore, quarterly progress reports are required to be completed for students on an IEP. The FF team examined a sample of these reports to determine if they would be suitable as tools to monitor individual progress. The Team found that they do not report on measurable performance goals, nor do they clearly indicate the areas in which the student has made progress. For example, “(student) has been doing well overall” – “(student’s) progress in language arts is solid.” These are neither clear nor measurable reports of student progress and fail to indicate what the student must do to continue to make sufficient progress toward the defined benchmarks. Because standards as stated in the IEP are inconsistent with current academic performance and progress reports do not appear to be effective indicators of student achievement, the usefulness of IEPs to monitor student performance and/or guide academic programming is significantly limited.

In interviews and focus groups, SPAC staff and leadership were unable to articulate who was responsible for monitoring the implementation of performance goals in the IEP. The school-wide response was, "I'm not sure." One person in a school leadership position suggested the Assistant Principal and Principal were responsible for oversight, which is completed via informal observation, but could not articulate how performance goals were measured to ensure students are making progress. An interview with the special education Department Chair at the district level suggested IEP monitoring was to be completed by the school's Department Chair. At Springfield Academy, the Department Chair is a full-time classroom teacher and located on only one of the school's two campuses for the duration of the school day. This is clearly insufficient to oversee the school-wide implementation of IEPs, to monitor student progress or assist teachers with necessary instructional accommodations. As a result, SPAC staff is not held accountable for careful and thorough attention to required student services. It is the judgment of the FF team that the lack of a coordinated system for managing the implementation of student IEPs has affected the quality of service delivery and has had an impact on student achievement rates at Springfield Academy.

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBAs) procedures are implemented "to support special education students whose major challenge affecting their learning is behavior, and whose IEPs reflect behavioral goals," as stated in the *Memorandum of Understanding* between the Springfield Public School and the Springfield Education Association, dated September 25, 2001. The FBA is three-tiered and is intended to identify antecedents that may trigger target behaviors and consequences that may maintain the target behavior, in order to formulate an action plan to address students' disruptive behavior. Interviews with school staff, including adjustment counselors and administrators, revealed that the expectation is that an FBA be completed for ALL students at Springfield Academy, though no one could confirm that FBAs were actually being completed consistently. One staff member stated, "Theoretically, it's (the FBA) supposed to be done. We need to work on this." The FF team recognized that the high transience rate at Springfield Academy may complicate the completion of FBAs in a timely manner; however, the lack of a coordinated system to ensure that FBAs are being carried out and lack of personnel accountability for their completion has likely contributed to their absence.

The lack of an organized system of oversight and coordinated management at Springfield Academy has resulted in limited IEP implementation, insufficient monitoring of student progress and inconsistent completion of a FBAs. In cases in which these tasks are completed, the quality appears to be inadequate, since personnel are not held responsible or accountable. This is of serious concern to the FF team, since these services are designed specifically to increase the likelihood of success in a student population with significant behavioral and academic needs.

The FF team recommends the following priority action to begin to build a sound foundation and address the current deficiencies in the organization and management structure at Springfield Academy.

- *Conduct an audit of the current programs in place to identify strengths that can be built upon and critical weaknesses that must be addressed during improvement planning.* This process is a large undertaking and requires sufficient district support and guidance to make sure district-level initiatives are fully incorporated. An outcome of this process must include the

assignment of personnel with appropriate skills to the essential task of coordinating special education service delivery and related programs at Springfield Academy. This includes ensuring sufficient time within the school day for responsible personnel to complete the associated tasks and the implementation of an accountability system designed to hold personnel assigned to these tasks responsible for the quality of implementation.

In order for student performance rates to increase at Springfield Academy, efficient coordination and consistent implementation of services, as set forth by the district plan and policies for special education, is imperative.

IV: Leadership and Planning

Because roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined at Springfield Academy, the school lacks a unified decision-making process. Also, instructional oversight is not occurring. In order for the school to see increases in student performance, these issues must be resolved. Springfield Academy needs to develop a cohesive strategy to guide improvement planning that is designed to meet the unique needs of its community.

The former Springfield Academy building was recently condemned, forcing the school to split into two sites – one which houses students at grades K-5 and the other, grades 6-12. Though a principal exists at each building, roles, boundaries and lines of authority have yet to be established. Distress and concern in regard to this ambiguity was outwardly expressed to the FF team in interviews with both principals, other school leaders and staff members. This has greatly limited the leadership capacity in the school and negatively impacted staff morale. Staff members cannot articulate who has authority in each school and are unsure of whom to ask for support. One staff member indicated, “I feel betrayed. I was promised support and I haven’t gotten any of it.” It is the judgment of the FF team that the dysfunction in the relationship of school leaders requires an immediate resolution, which must include a clear process for decision-making that considers how to best meet the needs of the student population at Springfield Academy.

Beyond the administrative level, the roles and responsibilities of instructional leadership at Springfield Academy also lacks clarity. Inadequacies in instructional practices were well-established in discussion under Domain I and limited oversight at the classroom level has been a common theme in this report. Effective instructional leadership is central to improving the quality of classroom practices. Currently, personnel in positions designated as instructional leadership at Springfield Academy have a varied understanding of their role/s, including methods for supporting instruction. The Reading Specialist and Collaborative Professional Development Teachers (CPDTs) at SPAC could not articulate methods nor the process used for supporting instruction, except for stating that teachers had to ask for assistance. Though the ELA CPDT asserted the expectation is that teachers align instruction with the Frameworks, personnel responsible for monitoring implementation of and adherence to the Scope and Sequence could not be confirmed. Furthermore, the CPDTs assigned to Springfield Academy also service several other alternative schools in the district. Though initially their responsibilities resided primarily at the secondary level, their role has reportedly been expanded to include some elementary level oversight. A clear schedule for time spent at various grade levels and/or school buildings was not

available. The CPDT positions are district level initiatives that have been created to support teaching and supply leadership at an instructional level within the school, which is currently happening with only limited effectiveness at Springfield Academy.

An oversight system for supplying instructional support for strategies specific to special education does not exist at Springfield Academy. Throughout interviews and focus groups with staff and school leadership, the same question was presented, “Who is in charge of overseeing that instructional practices are carried out in accordance with special education best practice?” Not a single member of the SPAC community could convincingly answer this question with the exception of district personnel, who cited the Principal. The district-level special education chair indicated the school’s Department Chair was responsible for assisting teachers with specialized instructional accommodations (who, as already indicated, holds a full-time teaching position at one of the school’s sites). Considerable ambiguity surrounds which school personnel are responsible for monitoring and supporting teachers. Further, as currently allocated, it seems nearly impossible that personnel in these positions could supply sufficient instructional support to fully meet the professional needs of the staff, especially given the high staff turnover rate at Springfield Academy. The lack of a coordinated program-wide system for supplying frequent, formative feedback to instructional staff across instructional content areas and to promote teaching strategies consistent with best practice in special education has been a factor contributing to the consistently low academic achievement at Springfield Academy.

As improvement efforts begin at Springfield Academy, it is the recommendation of the FF team that as an initial step, the school should:

- *Construct and disseminate clear, concise definitions of the roles of school and instructional leadership, including their respective functions, oversight responsibilities and capacity to support teaching and learning.* The lack of role definition and limited understanding of responsibility associated with various positions exists throughout the school’s administration and instructional leadership staff. It is the judgment of the FF team that these difficulties are currently hindering the success of the school and its opportunities for growth. Because of the significance of the problem, Springfield Academy is likely to experience the greatest success if district personnel facilitate this process and oversee that the standards set forth are upheld.

Throughout this report, numerous recommendations have been made to help guide Springfield Academy in their efforts to implement a school-wide improvement planning process. Each of these suggestions falls under one overarching goal, which constitutes the FF team’s final recommendation:

- *Implement a program-wide system for collecting information on classroom practices and the use of instructional strategies that can be used to inform professional development activities and guide the ongoing planning and implementation of improvement initiatives.*

As stated by a SPAC staff member, “We don’t know if we’re doing well or not. We don’t have anything to compare it to.” Participation in the upcoming PIM process gives Springfield Academy the opportunity to develop an improvement plan that meets the needs of the school’s unique student population. Central to the establishment of a meaningful assessment system is the frequent, regular collection of classroom information that is focused on teaching and student

learning. The proper implementation of this system will allow SPAC to engage instructional staff in making effective instructional decisions that emphasize best practices, inform professional development activities and, therefore, guide school-wide academic and improvement planning initiatives. The school should make use of tools that are already in place but presently underused, such as Individual Student Success Plans and IEPs.

Conclusion

The staff and administrators at Springfield Academy have focused much energy and attention to addressing the behavioral aspects of the students' experience and now must bring as much energy and attention to providing a high quality academic experience for the children in their care.

To meet their obligation to serve students' academic needs, Springfield Academy must address several significant deficiencies in the area of general educational practice: weak instruction; inadequate alignment between the curriculum as delivered and the district/state curriculum standards; lack of skills to differentiate instruction to meet specific student needs; and inadequate use of timely, informative student academic data.

Other significant deficiencies exist in the identification, delivery, and monitoring of services required for special education students. These include the misalignment of performance goals with cognitive assessment evidence; incomplete or non-specific reporting of progress toward academic benchmarks; inattention to timely completion and use of Functional Behavioral Assessments for all Springfield Academy students.

Underlying these programming issues are managerial issues. Roles and responsibilities must be clarified and accountability for professional performance established.

In the judgment of the Fact Finding Team, it is critically urgent that school and district leaders attend to the deficiencies in general educational practice, the delivery of special educational services and school management.

APPENDIX A
FACT FINDING SCHEDULE
Detailed Schedule for Fact Finding 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: Core Team Only

Core Team	
12:00- 1:00	Hotel check-in, lunch
1:00 – 5:00	Core team summarizes review of documents, panel report

Day 2: Full Team (Core Team + Practitioners)

	Core Team	Practitioners
7:30 – 8:30 AM	Introductions to principal, school tour; additional focus areas for class visits	
8:30 – 9:00 AM	Set up workspace	Meet students to be shadowed
9:00 – 12:00 AM	Meet with school leadership/ planning team	Shadow student #1
12:00 – 1:00	Lunch	Lunch with students; break
1:00 – 3:00 PM	Meet with district leaders/ support personnel	Shadow student #2
3:00 – 5:00 PM	Debrief school and district meetings, class visits; Construct responses to Domains 1 (and 2)	

Day 3: Full Team (Core Team + Practitioners)

	Core Team	Practitioners
7:30 – 8:00 AM	Review schedule, assign tasks	
8:30 – 9:30 AM	Share debrief summary with principal	Class visits as assigned
9:30 – 9:45 AM	Break	Break
9:45 – 10:45 AM	Focus Groups/ Interviews	Class visits as assigned
11:00 – 12:00 AM	Focus Groups/ Interviews	Class visits as assigned
12:00 – 1:00 P.M.	Lunch	Lunch
1:00 – 3:00 PM	Debrief school visits, focus group meetings; Practitioners depart	
3:00 – 5:00 PM	Summarize Responses to Questions for Domains 3 & 4	

Day 4: Core Team Only

Core Team	
7:30 – 8:00 AM	Arrival, review schedule of remaining interviews, class visits
8:00 – 9:00 AM	Share debrief summary with principal
9:00 – 12:00 AM	Complete any necessary class visits, interviews; finalize summary charts for all domains
12:00 – 1:00	Lunch
1:00 – 3:00 PM	Meet with school and district leaders/ support personnel to report team's responses to protocol questions

Appendix B
Team Members

Dr. Karen Laba, Chair, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

Megan Tupa, Core Team Member, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

Mary H. Bourque, Team Member, Asst. Superintendent, Chelsea Public Schools, Chelsea, MA

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