

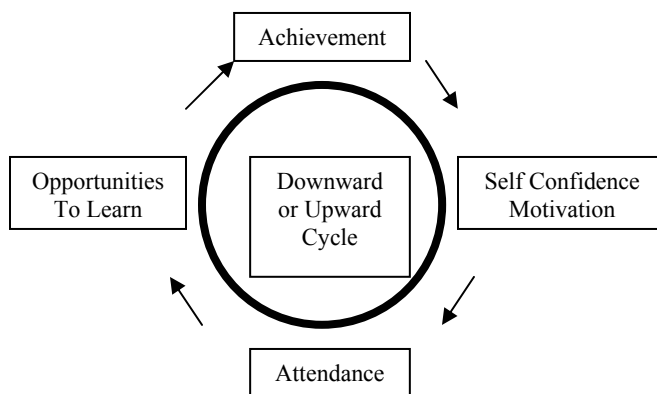
REPORT OF FACT FINDING REVIEW Massachusetts Department of Education

Massachusetts Career Development Institute Springfield Public Schools

Executive Summary

A Fact Finding (FF) team assembled by the Massachusetts Department of Education spent three days – February 1-3, 2005 – at the Massachusetts Career Development Institute (MCDI), conducting classroom observations and individual and small group interviews of district and school personnel and students. The task of the four educators comprising the FF team was to determine reasons for low levels of student performance at MCDI and to analyze the prospects for improved student performance. The FF team observed all teachers (except art) once or twice and interviewed the Director, Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) team, all major subject area teachers, the two school adjustment counselors, Supervising Principal of Alternative Schools, a group of district administrators and representative groups of students. Written documents were also reviewed, including the Panel Review Report, the School Improvement Plan (SIPS), lesson plans, samples of student work, the District Reading Plan, Springfield Code of Student Conduct, MCDI's Behavior Management Manual and other documents provided by the school and the Department of Education.

The FF team found that staff at MCDI is overly focused on students' chronic absenteeism as the dominant cause of students' low achievement. In the judgment of the FF team, MCDI staff is insufficiently focused on how to address students' low achievement in order to reverse a downward, reinforcing cycle. As the accompanying causal loop diagram illustrates, all these factors are interrelated. When attendance is low, opportunities to learn are reduced, which causes low achievement, which in turn causes lower self confidence and motivation.



Lower motivation causes lower attendance, thus reinforcing a downward cycle. In reality, all points on this causal loop are important to address. Staff at MCDI have been working to reverse the downward cycle at all the points illustrated in the causal loop. For example, they have sought parents' commitment to supporting their children's attendance. Working on Opportunities to Learn, they have entertained new ideas about after-school activities and changes in schedule of the school day. School adjustment counselors, the Director and, informally, the teaching staff

continue to address issues of Self Confidence and Motivation. And working directly on Achievement, the Director is implementing use of Learning Walks to improve delivery of curriculum and instruction. These strategies and others like them are important, but they are not enough.

This Fact Finding Report will present analyses and suggested actions to take regarding all factors in the causal loop, but the emphasis will be on ways to improve achievement – on instruction, curriculum and assessment. This is the point where leverage for improvement of student performance is most powerful and is most within the control of the school.

I. Curriculum and Instruction

Data collected by the FF team in written documents, interviews and classroom observations revealed a number of issues regarding instruction, delivery of curriculum and assessment. Inconsistency in quality of instruction and delivery of curriculum from classroom to classroom was found to be a major consideration for MCDI. While a nucleus of teachers was found to use some appropriate variety of instructional strategies and engage well with students, other teachers exhibited significant difficulties with classroom management, limited ability to make connections with students and a limited repertoire of instructional strategies.

Strengths that can support improved student performance:

- A core group of teachers whom fact finders rated as highly effective – approximately 42% of current major subject teachers, or 27% of all teachers
- Before-school common planning time and Extended Day professional development time already built into the school schedule
- Diagnostic testing in reading of all middle school students; reading skills of high school students assessed upon teacher referral

Findings that contribute to students' underperformance:

- Inadequate instructional leadership, including coaching, mentoring and monitoring to support and ensure consistently effective teacher practice
- Ineffective engagement of students and inadequate classroom management in some classes
- Insufficiently varied and differentiated instruction to capture students' interest and address individual needs
- Lack of in-depth analysis of student performance data; data not sufficiently disaggregated (e.g., by school program, class, gender, age) so that meaningful information is available to guide teachers' improvement efforts
- Inadequate information about the learning gaps that students have when they enter MCDI that would help teachers target their instructional strategies more effectively to meet the needs of individual students and that would help students understand where they are and what they need to learn
- An inadequate lesson planning process, without a template as a guide to the critical parts of a plan. For example, lesson objectives were missing in the plans reviewed by the FF team.
- Lack of rubrics that provide standards for levels of achievement for each skill and area of knowledge required for a learning activity

II. School Climate

MCDI has many strengths in the area of School Climate – particularly an orderly building and staff who are present and ready to defuse conflicts and are committed to working with the students at MCDI. Revising the approach to behavior management so that the focus is on incentives and positive reinforcement rather than consequences for negative behavior would be a major shift for the school, but one that fact finders believe would be more motivating for this population of students. Rescheduling the school day to allow for programs such as school-to-career, advisor/advisee, clubs and special interest small groups would contribute to an emphasis on positive interactions.

Strengths that can support improved student performance:

- A general level of respect and orderliness in the building
- Effective crisis intervention by Director, Quebec team, counselors and teachers
- An environment that feels safe because of the small size of school
- Teachers who are present and ready to defuse conflicts and some teachers, students report, who care and extend themselves to help them
- Bi-monthly meetings of Director and outside agencies
- Highly trained and experienced school adjustment counselors who counsel individual students
- New advisee program
- Commitment of staff to work with MCDI's students
- Good staff morale

Factors that contribute to students' underperformance:

- Behavior management that is based on consequences and sanctions after the fact of infractions rather than on prevention with incentives and positive rewards
- School schedule that does not allow any group work by school adjustment counselor
- Lack of linkage of school to career and college preparation

III. Organizational Structure and Management

MCDI has a basic organizational structure that can support improvement initiatives. Common planning time before school and professional development in weekly Extended Days provide excellent opportunities for staff to work together. Learning Walks used as a coaching and mentoring tool is an exemplary practice; plans for training teachers in Learning Walks so they can observe and learn from their colleagues will provide powerful professional development.

Strengths that can support improved student performance:

- Small class size
- The Director who is receptive to feedback and his own professional development
- Once a week, 90 minutes after school for professional development
- Before school, cycles of two and three common planning time periods per week
- The monthly interagency meetings between Director and outside agencies
- Mentoring of a new teacher by a Collaborative Professional Development Teacher (CPDT)
- Learning Walks

Factors that contribute to students' underperformance:

- Instructional supervision that provides inadequate coaching and mentoring designed to improve instruction and delivery of curriculum
- Staff evaluation that provides inadequate monitoring and evaluation of progress in change initiatives
- Professional development that is insufficiently focused and deep and is not well designed to change teachers' practice
- Inadequate collaboration between middle and high school teachers, missing an opportunity for developing deeper knowledge of ways to deliver curriculum
- Facilities and resources that do not support high levels of student performance, e.g., small and often windowless classrooms, inadequate bathroom facilities, unreliable transportation to gym and insufficient number of books

IV. Leadership and Planning

The Director's cheer leading leadership style, upbeat attitude and his effectiveness with and commitment to MCDI's students are great assets for the school. Revisiting the Mission statement and articulating core values, beliefs or visions for the school would provide direction for initiatives such as entrance and exit criteria and a behavior management system.

Strengths that can support improved student performance:

- Director is a great cheer leader, can motivate staff and connects with students
- Director has potential for leading change among teachers
- Partnerships that can be built upon: MCDI Inc., DYS, DSS, Probation, DTA
- New intake process in which parents are asked to commit to supporting their children's attendance

Factors that contribute to students' underperformance:

- A Mission statement and name of school that are not aligned with the program (regarding vocational opportunities) and a lack of statements of vision, core values or beliefs – all of which are needed to guide placement decisions and development of programs and services
- Parents/caretakers who, until the new intake process was initiated, had not been sufficiently involved in their children's education

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 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:

- 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 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

Enrollment

The Massachusetts Career Development Institute (MCDI) is one of the 47 public schools located in Springfield. MCDI is one of five alternative schools, serving students in grades 6-12. Students who attend MCDI are those who have failed or are failing in other district schools. Over the last four years, enrollment at this school has remained stable, from a low of 93 in 2003 to a high of 101 as of October 1 of this school year. During this time period, there have been noticeable changes in student demographics.

Between 2001 and 2004, the proportion of White students attending MCDI decreased from 32 to 11 percent, while the percentage of Hispanic students rose from 41 to 59 percent. This year, 30 percent of students are reported as Black, a slight increase over the 27 percent represented in 2001. Asian students accounted for 1 percent in 2001; in subsequent years there have been no Asian students at the school. In 2004, 78 percent of MCDI's students were from low income families. Ten 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, 10 percent of the students are reported to be receiving special education services, which is a decrease of 5 percent from last year.

In 2004, MCDI registered an attendance rate of 59.4 percent, with students absent 55.1 days on average. The school's retention rate was 32.3 percent in 2003, the last year for which this data are available, and dropouts for grades 9-12 were reported at 41.8 percent. No in-school suspensions were reported, though the out-of-school suspension rate was 50.5 percent. In addition, exclusions were reported at 140 percent, indicating that the school takes in a substantial percentage of its student body over the academic year.

Staffing

The 2004-2005 MCDI staffing report indicates that the school is composed of 1 administrator, 2 adjustment counselors at the school – one assigned to the middle school grades (6-8) also certified as a school psychologist, the other covering the high school (9-12) and also certified as a social worker, and 0 teachers. Approximately 42 percent of the educators at this school have taught there for three or fewer years. Ninety-one percent of the staff members are certified in the subject that they teach.

MCAS Overview

Students at MCDI are assessed in grades 7 and 10 in English language arts (ELA) and in grades 6, 8, and 10 in mathematics. The school has not been found to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in either ELA or mathematics since determinations were first made in 1999. In ELA, however, the sample size in 2003 and 2004 was too small for determinations to be issued. In the school's Cycle III End-of-Cycle (2003-2004) AYP Report, the school failed to make AYP in mathematics in the aggregate; no subgroups were large enough for determinations to be made.¹ The school is currently identified for Restructuring in mathematics, and has no Accountability Status in ELA.

Due to the transitory nature of MCDI'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 7

All Students

At the grade 7 level in ELA, four years of data are available; these data show slight improvement from 2001/2002 to 2003/2004. In 2004, 33 percent of the 12 students assessed scored in the Needs Improvement range and 67 percent were in Warning. These results were similar in 2003. In 2001, 100 percent of the 14 students assessed scored in the Warning range.

Special Education

Fewer than 10 Special Education students were assessed in grade 7 ELA; as such, no summary data are available.

Limited English Proficient

Fewer than 10 LEP students were assessed in grade 7 ELA; as such, no summary data are available.

GRADE 10

All Students

At the grade 10 level in ELA, three years of data are available; these data reflect a slight improvement trend. In 2003, 4 percent of the 24 students assessed scored in the Proficient range, 28 percent were in Needs Improvement and 68 percent were in Failing. In 2001, 14 percent

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). No subgroups at MCDI met the minimum sample size in 2004.

only of the 25 students assessed scored in the Needs Improvement range and the remaining 86 percent scored in the Failing range. Fewer than 10 students were assessed in 2004.

Special Education

Fewer than 10 Special Education students were assessed in grade 10 ELA; as such, no summary data are available.

Limited English Proficient

Fewer than 10 LEP students were assessed in grade 10 ELA; as such, no summary data are available.

Student Performance in Mathematics**GRADE 6****All Students**

Fewer than 10 students were assessed in grade 6 mathematics; as such, no summary data are available.

Special Education

Fewer than 10 Special Education students were assessed in grade 6 mathematics; as such, no summary data are available.

Limited English Proficient

Fewer than 10 LEP students were assessed in grade 6 mathematics; as such, no summary data are available.

GRADE 8**All Students**

At the grade 8 level in mathematics, five years of data are available; these data show consistent low performance. In 2004, 5 percent of the 17 students assessed scored in the Proficient range and the remaining 95 percent were in Warning. In 2003, 4 percent were in Needs Improvement and 96 percent scored in the Warning range. In 2001 and 2000, 100 percent scored in Warning.

Special Education

One year of summary data are available for Special Education students in grade 8 mathematics. In 2003, 1 of the 10 students assessed scored in Needs Improvement and the remaining 9 students scored in the Warning range.

Limited English Proficient

Fewer than 10 LEP students were assessed in grade 8 mathematics; as such, no summary data are available.

GRADE 10

All Students

At the grade 10 level in mathematics, four years of data are available; these data reflect a slight performance decline. In 2003, 4 percent of students scored in Needs Improvement and 96 percent were in Failing. In 2002, 100 percent scored in the Failing range. In 2001, 14 percent were in Needs Improvement and 86 percent were in the Failing range. Fewer than 10 students were assessed in 2004.

Special Education

Fewer than 10 Special Education students were assessed in grade 10 mathematics; as such, no summary data are available.

Limited English Proficient

Fewer than 10 LEP students were assessed in grade 10 mathematics; as such, no summary data are available.

Key Domains of Inquiry

I: Curriculum and Instruction

Data provided to the Fact Finding (FF) team indicate that students come to MCDI with a background of school failure, making teachers' work and students' work unusually challenging. Although interviews confirmed there are no written entrance criteria, there is common understanding that all MCDI students have a history of high rates of absenteeism (MCDI attendance rate: 59%, district: 89%, state: 94% in 2004), retention (MCDI: 32%, district: 6%, state: 2% in 2003) and varied gaps in learning. In addition, the mobility rate is 46 %, which makes it difficult for a majority of students to have any kind of consistency in their learning. Furthermore, some students were waived off special education Individualized Education Plans in order to be placed at MCDI where there is no special education staffing available (except for two small substantially separate classrooms in the middle school). Particularly with MCDI students, the FF team concludes that teachers and students need:

1. Assessments that identify and keep them informed about individual student's instructional levels in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics;
2. Richly varied instructional strategies; and
3. Delivery of curriculum that is compelling.

While the FF team found significant shortcomings in all these areas at MCDI, there were "pockets of excellence" in delivery of curriculum, instruction and student engagement: 42% of major subject teachers, or 27% of all teachers, were informally rated by classroom observers as highly effective.

Assessment: In looking at data about standards-based assessment in the School Improvement Plan (SIP), the FF team found lacking an in-depth analysis of student performance in ELA and Math. A more in-depth analysis would help teachers improve their practice by identifying the discrete skills and knowledge students need to acquire. For example, only two of five curriculum

strands in Math have been referenced in the SIP and mostly global skills in ELA are presented. The SIP did not indicate to what extent item analysis has been used to look for patterns of student failure that might reveal a need to change instructional practice. Interviews brought to light an intention to be general with student learning objectives in the SIP because MCDI students learning needs are so varied. But this approach makes the SIP fairly unusable for an individual teacher with questions about how best to teach a small group of students with varying instructional needs. Instead, assessment data need to be analyzed for school programs and to be disaggregated by subgroups (e.g., age, class groupings, and gender). The fact finders noted, for example, that girls' absence rate is higher than boys' and wonder what programs and services might be changed to address their particular needs. In another example, reading assessments reported by grade level without reference to students' ages or number of grades repeated are of limited use for the school's student population. What adaptations in reading instruction are needed in order to motivate older students to improve their reading ability? Currently, teachers do not have the level of detailed information they need in order to change their practice to meet the unique needs of their students.

There are three categories of students at MCDI for whom performance data are available. First, all students entering grades 6 or 7 are tested in reading. Second, the fourteen students in the special education program have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that provide data about performance levels and detailed goals. These students with special needs are also tested in reading and are grouped by reading level into two substantially separate classrooms. Students who scored at primer level to grades 4 or 5 are in one group and those scoring grades 5 to 8 are in another group. Third, high school students who have been tested by the reading teacher based on referrals. While data are available for these three student groups, the school lacks a comprehensive set of assessment for all students. There was very little evidence that content area teachers are using strategies to help students better access the books being used in their classrooms. The FF team also notes that assessment of students' achievement levels in math has not been addressed, aside from what may be in students' IEPs.

Without disaggregated data about discrete skills and knowledge, not only do teachers have insufficient tools to do their work, but students also lack a way to know where they stand. Their attendance, suspension and retention rates all indicate they see themselves as unsuccessful learners. Without assessments that help them know their current performance levels and that can track small increments of success, they have little chance of getting "hooked" on education. The majority of MCDI students do not have a way to understand where they are now and what specific skills and knowledge they need to acquire in order to reach a goal. Contrary to this trend, one student who has gotten hooked on learning by a very skillful teacher was interviewed. Reporting that he'd been on a roller coaster but now wants to go to a regular high school next year, he said, "I want to be tested at the beginning of the year so I know what I need to learn."

The FF team reviewed a few Student Success Plans, looking for ways to access levels of student performance that are already being used in Springfield – to avoid imposing more paperwork on staff. These documents do not appear to provide much information that would be useful to teachers or students in helping them focus quickly on current instructional levels. A more productive approach might be for the staff to examine all available standards-based assessments to determine whether any of them can be better used to provide teachers with specific information about students' current achievement levels. One possibility is to consistently use the results from the quarterly Step Up Springfield assessment as a diagnostic tool.

The FF Team suggests developing the use of standards-based rubrics as an assessment tool for teachers and as a tool with potential for improving delivery of curriculum. Rubrics can also help students set specific goals for their own work. Additionally, well-developed rubrics provide clear descriptors of skills and knowledge in a layered curriculum and can be useful when differentiating instruction – particularly helpful with a highly mobile student population having a variety of learning gaps. Observations in classrooms revealed one rubric only in evident use: a math “Rubric for Grading,” with descriptors for 0 to 4 points. The FF Team noted that in the SIP, there are plans for more extensive rubric development. MCDI staff might request help from the district in obtaining and/or developing appropriate, high quality rubrics that provide standards for levels of performance in discrete areas of skills and knowledge.

Instruction: Extreme variations in instruction – for example, in the degree of student engagement, variety of instructional strategies, quality of teacher-student relationships, and the clarity of objectives and expectations – were observed. Many missed opportunities in which teachers could have connected the content with students’ life experiences or cultural background, as well as adapt lessons to capture students’ interest, were observed. While all teachers appeared knowledgeable about the curriculum content, observers saw little differentiated instruction, on-task interaction among students, or engagement of students in higher order thinking. Few teachers asked students to elaborate on their very brief responses. Much of the instruction observed was teacher-directed and driven by drill and practice worksheets. (Some of the latter reportedly is due to lack of books.) The extremes in teacher performance were mirrored in student performance: the same students who were observed in one class to be very engaged in learning were observed in another class unprepared to participate and out of control, showing blatant disrespect for one another and for the teacher. This observation made it clear to the FF team that inadequate instructional practice is a significant contributor to poor student performance at MCDI. Low student performance cannot be solely attributed to poor attendance. Students’ opportunity to learn in the classes where students were out-of-control or where there was pervasive inattention and disengagement would be low to nil. So, although there are currently pockets of fine instructional practice at MCDI, systems that support and monitor consistently high standards of practice for all personnel are just beginning to be developed.

A district administrator made the comment that “good instruction always leads to good attendance,” making the connection between what needs to happen at MCDI and the predominant presenting behavior of the students who have been placed there. However, this connection was not clearly articulated in other interviews or in the documents reviewed by the FF team. Staff has been overwhelmed, understandably, by the challenge of reaching students with such histories of school failure and may be just now beginning to see the wisdom in focusing more on their own practice as a means of improving student performance.

There are several positives in this regard.

1. Interviews indicate the Director is open to and interested in developing his capacity as an instructional leader, to supervise and evaluate instruction. The district is providing two relevant opportunities for professional development in this area. District-wide professional development is in place for program leaders, and administrators of the five alternative schools have regular opportunities to meet. For these opportunities to be effective, the district must ensure that both are focused, with clear expectations for changes in performance.

2. Some very fine instruction was observed at MCDI. These teachers could form the nucleus of an Instructional Leadership Team that would focus on and help lead colleagues in implementing new school-wide initiatives, such as improving instructional practice and professional development.
3. District leaders see teachers as open to having dialogue about their practice and see them as asking, “How do we move kids along the continuum given the range in needs?” Teachers at MCDI have the opportunity for professional development (and faculty meetings) each week during 90-minute Extended Day times. (More on professional development will be addressed under the Organizational Structures and Management domain, below.)
4. Common planning time, instituted this fall, is built into the schedule. It is available in cycles of two and three 35-minute periods per week each for middle school and high school teams (7:45-8:20, with the other level covering before-school duties). (The M.S. team includes special educators, reading teacher and M.S. counselor. H.S. team includes H.S. counselor.) These meetings have potential for strengthening instructional practice. The Director, with support from district personnel, must ensure that teachers have the guidance they need to make strategic and targeted use of this time – for example, to share information about developing lesson plans or using rubrics.

Lesson Plans: Monitoring of lesson plans is well-organized. Teachers hand in lesson plans each Friday to the Director, who uses a checklist to evaluate the adequacy of the plans. However, there are no criteria for lesson plan development; the checklist of what to look for does not include lesson objectives or learning outcomes. Because the FF team noted that lesson objectives were not always made clear to students, this appears to be an area that needs improvement. Developing a template for lesson planning that all teachers would use is a strategy that would help ensure quality lesson planning and provide a basis for productive sharing on many levels among colleagues.

Curriculum: Teachers are making an effort to use Springfield’s scope and sequence, which is aligned with the state Frameworks, in ELA and math. Some teachers reported difficulty keeping up with district expectations for covering the content. Teachers have not had much time with the CPDTs who have been trained to help teachers effectively use the curriculum with their students. Understanding, also, that MCDI students typically have significant learning gaps, questions about delivery of curriculum are only greater. Measures need to be taken to ensure the fidelity of implementation of the district curriculum. Use of a common lesson plan template would help ensure this.

As reported above (see comments under “Assessment”), reading levels of MCDI students vary widely. Given a shortage of resources, one of the most promising interventions is articulated in The District Reading Plan (2002): the district supports a model wherein content area teachers are called upon to help students read well. “In this type of program, teachers model reading and writing in their content areas and directly support their students’ content area literacy” (pg. 18). The FF team observed many fine examples of content area teachers following these practices; however, there were other observations in which students did not receive this assistance. The specialty (“shop”) teachers particularly need to amplify core curriculum content, in which reading is a key skill.

MCDI is to be commended for its collaborative relationship with MCDI, Inc. However, one of the challenges presented when teachers are “borrowed” from another facility is the difference in expectations for both curriculum and instruction. The subjects taught by the “borrowed” shop

teachers are highly valued by students and important motivators for keeping students actively engaged in school. Observations indicated that steps need to be taken to monitor curriculum and instruction, to make these shop programs integral to students' school experience and as fully well-formulated as is teaching of the major subjects.

Recently, MCDI has obtained a small grant to support students' skill development in mathematics. An after-school math tutor is now available to seniors; students report they like it.

II. School Climate

MCDI has a general level of orderliness and respect throughout the building. Students reported they feel safe, relating this both to the small enrollment and to teachers who are present and ready to defuse conflicts. Students also reported that some teachers make significant efforts to help them. MCDI employs one full-time school resource officer; two additional security guards are shared with the other alternative school that now occupies the building. These three individuals know the students and are reportedly effective in helping to maintain orderly conduct and to intervene when necessary.

The FF team commends MCDI for several initiatives designed to improve attendance: e.g., bi-monthly meetings with agencies that also support school attendance (DSS, DYS, DTA, Probation, MCDI, Inc.); new intake process; new advisee program; math tutoring; and incentives such as a pizza party.

The FF Team did have concerns about some aspect of the behavior management system at the school. First, current behavior management places too great an emphasis on punitive measures. A behavior management system is needed that is: (1) based on incentives and positive reinforcement; (2) integral to students' school experience; and (3) consistently implemented by all staff. Second, there is inadequate linkage of school-to-career and preparation for college. And third, a lack of activities, such as clubs and in-house athletics, limits development of a more cohesive school culture. Interviews with district administrators indicate little interest in allocating the district's scarce resources for activities (e.g., clubs, athletics) that are not deemed appropriate for an alternative school program. The following comments address school climate issues that are more within the purview of MCDI to develop.

Behavior Management System: The district's Code of Student Conduct and MCDI's Behavior Management Manual, which were developed in 2002-2003 for middle school students, fill an important need. However, they do not provide for any structured system of positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior. While it is necessary to have consistent consequences for actions, the most effective behavior management plan will emphasize positive reinforcement and incentives. This is especially true for MCDI, where the majority of students are old enough to drop out. (The average age of ninth graders is reported to be 16.9, with a high school enrollment of approximately 66% of the school's enrollment.)

In summary, the fact finders believe there are two issues regarding behavior management: (1) a coherent behavior management system is needed that focuses on the positive, that all students understand, and that all staff participate in, and (2) a positive approach to setting clear expectations for appropriate behavior should be separated out and distinguished from policies and practices that are punitive.

School Adjustment Counseling: MCDI is fortunate to have two highly trained, skillful adjustment counselors whose focus is on behavior that affects academic work. They spend significant time on case management, crisis intervention, providing counseling to students with IEPs and referring students for additional services outside of school. Their role does not include counseling of individual students who do not have IEPs. This is a problem; some students who sign off IEPs to attend MCDI nevertheless have significant emotional needs. All their services are with individual students, since the school schedule does not provide time for meetings with groups.

When new students enter MCDI, the middle school counselor conducts a needs assessment with the student (and parent, if possible). He is not involved in the Director's intake meeting with student and parent. The high school counselor does a one-hour assessment with each new student close to the time they enter the school.

For 8th grade students transitioning to a regular high school, the counselor assists them in selecting a school, visits the school with them in the first week of school and maintains contact through the first marking period to be sure the transition is working. Eighth grade English and math teachers try to prepare students academically for transition to a regular high school.

Providing an organized program of school and career planning is usually a guidance counseling function (as distinct from school adjustment counseling). MCDI does not have a guidance counselor, and a well-developed school-to-career program has been beyond what the adjustment counselors have time to provide. Some teachers help students make connections between the curriculum content and skills needed for future schooling or jobs, but students also want help with issues such as resume preparation, what to wear to interviews and how to interview.

An effective model for school adjustment counseling includes work with groups of students because there will never be enough resources to meet the needs of students, one by one, and also because students are better able to learn some new behaviors and deal with some problems in group settings. Currently, there are no time periods when counselors can meet with students except by taking them out of class. Adding more counseling time is not the best or the most feasible answer. Consequently, the primary recommendation of the FF team for improving counseling services is for the school to determine whether the school schedule can be changed to provide time for such things as community meetings, advisee/advisor meetings, clubs that would help build a more cohesive school culture, and small-group time for school-to-career planning. MCDI should also consider creating meetings for specific groups of students, e.g., pregnant and parenting girls and young men with children. District administrators might make some expertise available to add to that of the counselors and Director in planning and developing such initiatives, if the schedule can be restructured.

Advisee Program: Newly instituted, the student advisee program was described as a "critical friend" model designed to increase personal connection with students. Teachers are to make personal contacts with their advisees, telephoning home and following up on various issues in an attempt to increase student engagement. This promising initiative needs to be assessed.

Staff Morale: Teachers on the whole are committed to working at MCDI. Staff turnover and absenteeism both appear low. Interviews indicated a beginning of staff buy-in to improvement planning, despite what was described as a very difficult school improvement planning process, undertaken without adequate outside assistance or exemplars on which to base their work.

III. Organizational Structures and Management

Several organizational structures that enhance prospects for improved student performance at MCDI are in place. Among them are common planning time before school, 90 minutes per week of Extended Day professional development time, Learning Walks, commitment to small class sizes, collaborative arrangements for teaching shop classes and gym, and a security system that provides a relatively safe environment for students and staff. The willingness of the Director and staff to plan for improvements is evidenced by their involvement in drafting the SIP and participating in before- and after-school planning and professional development meetings. The Director is receptive to feedback and has been participating in a variety of professional development activities. Specific areas for improvement follow.

Instructional Supervision: Supervision of instruction – including coaching, mentoring and specific feedback about instruction and delivery of curriculum – has been insufficient to bring about needed improvement in teachers’ practice. Although the Director reportedly visits many classrooms and is seen as being available to teachers, the primary focus of his attention appears to be assistance around individual student behavior. Reportedly he has not felt free to make written notes about his observations of teachers’ instructional strengths and needs for improvement, understanding that, as a supervisor, he is limited to two written observations per year. District administrators, however, were clear with the FF team that observations with written feedback to teachers for supervisory purposes (for example, in the form of Learning Walks) may be conducted as frequently as desired. Administrators need to be clear with each other to differentiate between observations used for purposes of contractual performance evaluation and observations made for purposes of supervision that supports professional growth and development. Currently, the Learning Walks are referred to as “drive-bys,” which unfortunately is a result of the monitoring function. Staff and administrators will need to work toward a change in culture that accepts Learning Walks, or other formats for classroom observations, as a means of working together toward improving learning outcomes for students.

Learning Walks hold great potential as a tool for improving instruction. New to MCDI, only one has been done as of early February and another is scheduled later this month. They were designed to monitor whether teachers are implementing the strategies outlined in the SIP. Currently, the School Support Specialist is accompanying the Director on these Learning Walks. The Director uses his Palm Pilot to record what he sees and will be sending a monthly log to the district office. These, in turn, will be used as an implementation reporting device to send to the state. Seeing the opportunity of using Learning Walks for more than monitoring purposes, the Director has ambitious plans for using them to address the school’s needs for improving instruction. He hopes to conduct two per month, using the Learning Walks protocol for teacher observation. He also plans to train teachers in making Learning Walks so they can use the format as a guide to their own learning by observing in colleagues’ classrooms. A significant benefit to using a tool such as Learning Walks for these purposes is that a certain level of consistency is maintained in terms of school leaders’ expectations for teacher performance – an important characteristic of accountability and improvement initiatives.

Beyond what the Director provides, mentoring of new teachers is also provided by the CPDTs. In a small staff, with few teachers in a given subject area to learn from, this support from the CPDTs is greatly appreciated.

Professional Development: A review of the SIP and the school's Extended Day Professional Development Agenda Reporting Form indicates that professional development is unfocused and inadequately conceived. The Extended Day Professional Development Agenda includes 12 different topics in the 15 sessions listed. It is not based on sufficient analysis of highest priority student needs, nor is it consistently structured with a process and depth that have potential for changing teacher practice. The FF team has not seen any stated intended outcomes. Professional development without follow-up coaching is not likely to change teacher practice. Based on interview data, the FF team finds that, although follow-up coaching has been available in some instances, there appears not to be consistent follow-up coaching by the professional development trainer, a CPDT, or other resource. In some instances where the need is urgent, a three-step approach may be needed. For example, teachers who have difficulty with classroom management may require professional development, coaching that is related to the professional development, and additional coaching and monitoring by an administrator to be certain new practices are in place.

Professional development in its best form is concentrated, focused and systematic. It starts at the district level with district professional development goals, moves into greater specificity and focus with the supervising principal of the five alternative schools and their program leaders, and then to teachers and, finally, implementation with students. At the alternative school level, learning strategies by visiting other alternative programs that are successful is often a powerful learning opportunity.

Potential professional development priorities for MCDI:

1. **Instructional Leadership:** increase Director's ability to coach teachers in developing their repertoire of instructional strategies and delivery of curriculum, and form an instructional leadership team of faculty to support improvement of teacher practice.
2. **Instructional Strategies:** how to use assessment data to drive instruction; how to make connections for students between the curriculum and students' lives; what strategies to use for more differentiated instruction; how to provide varied instructional strategies.
3. **Curriculum:** deepen teachers' understanding and implementation of the standards.
4. **Reading Assessment:** how can teachers better assess students' reading level as a way to make instruction more targeted and meaningful for students.
5. **Adjustment Counselors:** for the district to make professional development available that is relevant to counselors by including them in trainings with their counselor colleagues elsewhere in the district. Always requiring their attendance with the teaching staff is not addressing their needs.

The district can provide support by helping MCDI develop a professional development plan that is targeted to priority needs and is designed to change practice.

School Facilities and Resources: Inadequate facilities and resources impact school climate and students' ability to learn. When asked what they like about the school, some students answered an opposite question: the inadequate facilities were what they most urgently wanted to tell the interviewers. Students reported that the boys' bathroom has no privacy, soap or mirror and the girls only have one bathroom (one toilet). (Girls were frequently observed to be waiting their turn.) To a significant degree, instructional methods are driven by inadequate resources: worksheets when textbooks are not available, a media class without access to the internet and computers that do not work; no available gym when the van is out of commission. Some

classrooms are very small and many have no windows. When adolescents are in a confining space with no outdoor outlook, no gym or facility in which to move around, limited “shops” and limits on the tools needed for learning, the environment is placing heavy demands on them to be attentive and engaged learners. Increasing the number of textbooks (and potentially other learning materials that the FF team was not able to assess) and maintaining working computers and gym transportation are top on the fact finders’ list of resources needed at MCDI.

Staff Evaluation: Observations in classrooms made it clear that systems are not in place to ensure an adequate level of teaching that is consistent in all classes. (As stated above, in some classrooms, instruction and delivery of curriculum were exemplary and students were clearly engaged in active learning.) The district and MCDI Director need to determine how to improve teacher evaluation so that all students can access effective instruction and delivery of curriculum in every classroom.

IV. Leadership and Planning

As noted above (see Instruction and Professional Development sections), improvement of instructional leadership is a critical issue for MCDI. There are several strengths that can be built upon to develop stronger instructional leadership. The FF team found pockets of excellent teaching that can serve as a model. Also, common planning and professional development time are already built into the schedule. With these strengths, the potential for improving student performance will depend significantly on leadership that helps staff understand the relationship of quality instruction to students’ performance. Continuing to attribute root causes of underperformance almost exclusively to absenteeism is a distraction from dealing directly with what is most in the school’s control – high quality delivery of curriculum and instructional practices. Revisiting the school’s mission and developing a clear vision for what the school should look like and be like will support this improvement process.

Involvement of Parents/Families: MCDI has very low participation of parents/caregivers. Newsletters are sent home, and the school has recently attempted an open house – the latter with very low parent participation. Counselors want to work with parents, but have little access to them. However, a strategy new this fall – a new intake plan – seems to be resulting in dramatically improved attendance. New ways to maintain ongoing contact with parents/caregivers who made commitments during the intake process need to be developed; new ways to make contact with parents/caregivers of longer-term students need to be devised. One suggestion of the FF team is for MCDI to implement a “family communication plan” that would specify for each student how the parents and school agree to communicate about student’s progress. This could become part of the intake process and potentially part of the advisee program.

Mission and Vision: There is not a clear alignment between the original mission of MCDI and its current programming. The original mission of the school was to provide an alternative setting for students with high rates of absenteeism and retention who were at risk of dropping out of school. Small classes and a vocational component were central in this plan. In recent years, the number of courses other than gym and the four major subjects – “shops” as they are called – has been limited. Currently, only art and media (with inadequate technology) are offered, and links to career counseling, internships, jobs or job training are provided informally by teachers and only individually by counselors. Interviews with district leaders indicated interest in improving

shop offerings. There are plans to hire a new sheet metal instructor; the wood shop should be available soon.

Entrance and exit criteria have not been written for MCDI, although both are being drafted at this time. An outdated mission statement provides no guidance in determining what student population the school is intended to serve. Not having anything written about a vision for the school, or its core values or beliefs, only contributes to vagueness about who the school should be designed to serve.

Part of improvement planning should include revisiting the mission to determine what commitment the district has to providing a vocational component. There needs to be a plan for providing shop courses and a school-to-career component needs to be developed and delivered to students. As discussed above (see School Adjustment Counseling section), current scheduling of the school day should be revisited to determine whether community meeting time for small groups, such as school to career counseling, can become part of the regular school day. This time could become a powerful component of an incentives-based behavioral management system.

Conclusion

In meetings with the leadership and staff at MCDI, the FF team found the beginnings of buy-in, openness and willingness to focus on improving their practice as a way to increase students' performance. To actually do so will require overcoming the focus on low attendance as the root cause of low achievement rather than seeing low attendance as the result of low achievement. MCDI staff will need to gain a sense of efficacy that the actions they take to make classroom work more effective and relevant will ultimately be the most effective strategy to increase student performance.

Instructional leadership needs to involve setting high expectations, coaching and mentoring to ensure improvements in practice. Continued development of skill with Learning Walks is a promising strategy. The potential for change is enhanced by the presence of a core group of teachers who were rated by observers to be highly effective – approximately 42% of current major subject teachers, or 27% of all teachers. Leadership should consider engaging these teachers in the overall improvement of instruction.

Better ways to assess students' current instructional levels in ELA and math would enable teachers to provide instruction that is more varied and differentiated, thus better addressing the needs of each student. And students could better understand a starting point for what they need to learn. Better assessment is particularly important because MCDI students have learning gaps related to absenteeism, and they have high rates of mobility.

Given students' learning gaps, there needs to be a plan for imbedding reading instruction in all courses. All teachers in all content areas need to help students access their curriculum through reading.

Instructional strategies need to be more varied in order to deliver curriculum that is compelling to students who have a history of school failure. Engagement with students can be enhanced by connecting the content with students' lives. Lesson plans with learning objectives will require teachers to be clear about the student outcomes they want. This will help students understand the purpose of the lesson and increase their engagement in the learning process. Rubrics are a potentially powerful strategy, useful as a standards-based assessment tool as well as

communicating to students their current performance level and indicating what they must do in order to achieve to a high level.

Assistance with classroom management for classes in which students were observed out of control must be provided so that all students in all classes can productively engage in learning. Along with supervision and evaluation regarding classroom management strategies, a focus on improved instructional strategies and delivery of curriculum in these classes should also serve to support a better learning environment.

Current behavior management strategies are based primarily on consequences and sanctions after the fact of infractions, rather than on prevention. A prevention-focused system of behavior management that is based on incentives and positive reinforcement and that all school personnel buy into and participate in is a recommended shift in practice. Incentives and rewards focused on achievement should be powerful in combination with the above-described improvements in teacher practice.

Professional development needs to be more focused and designed to go deep enough so it has potential to change teachers' practice and build the Director's capacity to become a top notch instructional leader.

Improvement plans can support changes in practice if they are based on (1) a clear mission and vision statements (or core values or beliefs); (2) in-depth analysis of student performance data; and (3) provide objectives that are useful to teachers as guides to making changes in their practice.

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

Aretha Miller, Chair, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

Ann Dinsmoor, Core Team Member, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

John Peron, Team Member, Principal, Morningside Community School, Pittsfield, MA

Melissa Earl, Team Member, Director, Curriculum & Instruction, North Brookfield Schools, MA

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