

School Panel Review Report Massachusetts Career Development Institute Springfield Public Schools

Introduction

The purpose of the School Panel Review Process is to assist the Commissioner of Education in determining whether State intervention is needed to guide improvement efforts in schools where students' MCAS performance is not at a level that reaches the school's Adequate Yearly Progress targets in English language arts or mathematics or both. The Massachusetts Career Development Institute met these criteria and was one of 15 schools selected for panel review in Fall/Winter of 2004-05. The panel review was conducted on Nov. 30- Dec. 1, 2004.

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

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

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

The panel's findings and conclusions on the two key questions will be forwarded to the Commissioner of Education for consideration, together with school performance data, in determining whether Massachusetts Career Development Institute is deemed under-performing. The panel was not asked to formulate a sound plan for school improvement where such a plan does not presently exist or to recommend a course of action to create the conditions for successful implementation of sound improvement strategies where such conditions at present do not appear to exist. Diagnostic and/or prescriptive intervention, where needed to assist an under-performing school, occurs at the next stage of the school review process.

Massachusetts Career Development Institute 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, 2004. 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 – 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 9 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 assessed population 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 populations tested at all grade levels, a degree of caution is required in examining the school's MCAS results. The data available are described below.

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.

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 Limited English Proficient (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 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 is 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.

PANEL RESPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS

Massachusetts Career Development Institute (MCDI) is one of five alternative schools in Springfield. It contains three programs: an alternative middle school, with 16 students currently enrolled; a Special Needs middle school, with 14 students assigned to two substantially separate classes; and an alternative high school, with 66 students currently enrolled. Massachusetts Career Development Institute, Inc. leases space in its industrial adult training facility to the Springfield Public Schools to house the school. Several shop teachers and two security guards are also supplied by MCDI, Inc. to MCDI. The original mission of the school was described by district administrators as providing an alternative setting for students who were at risk of dropping out of school, often after repeated retentions in ninth grade. The space accommodated small class sizes and a vocational component to provide practical incentives for students to come to school. However, the school has reportedly offered few vocational or shop classes for the past several years. It currently offers art and media classes but no vocational shops nor any links to career counseling, internships, jobs or job training.

Aside from the very small class size, the Panel could not discern from observing instruction in all of the classrooms or from individual and focus group interviews with the small staff and supporting district personnel how the school functions as an alternative to the standard school setting. Interviews with district administrators (including the Superintendent, Assistant to the Superintendent, Director of Intervention Services, the Principal assigned to supervise the five alternative schools) and the Supervisor and staff at the school indicated a lack of specific criteria for assigning students to this school.

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

No. There appears to be a disconnect between the generic steps taken in the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) process of data-driven improvement planning and the size and structure of the programs and the specific learning needs of the students at MCDI. Analysis of student weaknesses tends to lead to one cause, “lack of exposure and practice” due to extremely low student attendance. From this analysis, the team produced an 80-page document that contains many of the components of a sound plan for a grade 6-12 school with about 100 students and 12 full-time staff. As a result, there is no real sense among district and school leadership and staff that this plan will lead to improvements in student performance.

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

MCDI staff analyzed MCAS results in formulating their first school improvement plan (SIP) last spring. The school did not include any analysis of the effectiveness of the programs and services currently in place at the school to help determine the root causes for why the gaps they identified in their students’ learning exist.

Further, important issues of poor student attendance – clearly and repeatedly identified by staff, district and school leader as problematic – were not sufficiently analyzed or addressed in the school’s improvement plan.

In response to a district mandate, Mass Career Development Institute created their first school improvement plan in the spring of 2004 – from April to May. Panel members received a copy of a plan dated 2003-2004; however, there was no mention of this plan during teacher interviews. Teachers referred to the 2004-2005 SIP as their first plan. In two months, the school analyzed raw MCAS data provided by the district and identified academic areas for student improvement. District-wide training sessions help guide principals in the steps of planning and improvement mapping (PIM). As part of the PIM training, schools are told to use multiple sources of data to corroborate or verify the conclusions drawn from state test. MCDI analyzed Stanford 9 scores, district assessments and teacher tests. The “triangulation of evidence” led staff to the same conclusions drawn from MCAS analysis. For example, an analysis of Stanford 9, MCAS and teacher tests all showed measurement as a weak area for students.

The school lists student learning needs as broad objectives reflecting the Massachusetts Frameworks. In ELA, for example, “All students will be able to demonstrate knowledge of scope and sequence through appropriate use of vocabulary in writing and reading (ELA Standard Four)”. In math, “All students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of measurable attributes in objects and their units, systems and processes of measurements (8.M.1-2).” While these areas may represent accurate categories of student learning gaps, the skills and knowledge teachers should focus on are not defined explicitly enough to guide instructional improvement. As written, the objectives include a vast array of literacy and math needs rather than a focused, targeted set of skills and knowledge weaknesses specific to MCDI students.

While the school’s data analysis identified broad gaps in student learning – comprehension of vocabulary, writing coherent sentences, using proper units of measurement, and relationships between patterns, functions and algebra – they did not explicitly define the knowledge and skills that hinder student success.

The causal determinants of student knowledge and skill needs as detailed in the school’s plan are generally limited in scope, primarily focused on “lack of exposure to,” “more practice in,” or “more time with” the identified student learning objectives. For example, the causes listed for the objective, “All students will use knowledge of standard English conventions in their writing, revising and editing” are, “Students need more exposure and experience in the appropriate use of standard English conventions” and, “Students need more exposure and experience in the appropriate use of purpose of editing and revising in written work.” The school’s determination of the causes of student weakness does not reflect a thorough examination of the factors likely to be contributing to the learning gaps; rather, it is limited to students needing “more exposure and experience.”

The predominate rationale listed in the school’s plan for students’ lack of knowledge/skills is the inadequate coverage of the competencies the school aims to address. The plan lists these reasons for poor performance in ELA: “Students will receive additional instruction in the appropriate use of standard English conventions and practice its use in daily writing” and, “Students will receive

additional instruction in the appropriate use of editing and revising and additional practice on a weekly basis.” The gaps in instruction are explained by all stakeholders as resulting from poor student attendance. The school did not list the reasons why students struggle with standard English conventions in their writing nor why they need practice editing. Rather, the school listed students’ absences as the reason why learning gaps exists. While attendance is likely a valid contributor to student learning weaknesses, it is too narrow to fully explain the reasons students may be experiencing learning difficulties.

An area of concern among panelists is the quality of the school’s efforts to identify general trends in item analysis for both ELA and math. The trends focus mainly on “possible connections to high absenteeism post and present” and “measurable gaps in students’ abilities prior to arrival at MCDI.” In spite of the small number of students tested in 2004 (the Massachusetts Department of Education reports one student in 6th grade took the MCAS test, 13 in 7th grade, 22 in 8th grade and 19 in 10th grade), it appears the school missed an opportunity to evaluate school programs, curriculum and instruction to identify why student gaps exists but rather placed blame on student absenteeism. DOE reports the school’s attendance rate in 2004 as 59.4 percent with an average of 55.1 days absent and in 2003, 69.5 percent with students missing 41.8 days. In 2002, the attendance rate was 62.7 percent and students missed an average of 46.1 days, and in 2001, the school’s attendance rate was 57.7 percent with students missing an average of 76.1 days. Issues of attendance have been persistent at MCDI over the past four years. The school has chosen to cite attendance issues as the main contributor for low student performance, however it has not systematically addressed them.

Through multiple interviews and materials reviewed, it was evident to the panel that the school has not gathered program evaluation data that could help the staff address students’ academic weaknesses. The team heard clearly and repeatedly from all stakeholders that attendance is the paramount issue facing the school. As a result of poor student attendance, district, staff and school leaders describe the pervasive problem facing students as “gaps in learning.” These performance gaps are described by everyone interviewed as preventing students from successfully accessing grade level curriculum. To this end, the team found that all stakeholders readily identified students’ shortcomings rather than identify program changes that could address them. For example, seven out of eight students who participated in a focus group acknowledge poor attendance at their previous school and improved attendance at MCDI. When asked why, students unanimously responded that MCDI has a later start time than their previous school – 8:30 am vs. 7:30 am. There is no indication that the school has considered alternatives to the current starting and ending times to address their attendance problem.

The school has instituted a new advisor/advisee program to increase the personal connection with students, as well as a new intake process this year, which includes a contract with parents of incoming students around attendance. Also, students from Western N.E. College are reportedly coming in to help students with homework. However, although MCDI is an alternative school and, by some accounts, geared toward students with long histories of chronic absenteeism throughout its existence, a thorough analysis of the problem and investigation of approaches to the problem has not been done and no analysis of the issue is included in the plan.

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

No. While student learning objectives and instructional change objectives are directly tied to specific student performance goals and defined in measurable terms, the causal analysis again suggests that improved attendance will result in improved student performance. While there is a logical connection between improved attendance and the potential for improved performance, neither the school nor the district has any plan to address the long-standing issue of attendance. There seems to be a general consensus, heard by the Panel throughout its visit, that attendance is an intractable problem for which they have already, in one staff members' words, "tried everything." Since most of the students arrive at the school with a history of chronic absenteeism and there appears to be inadequate consideration at the school or district level of programmatic approaches to improving attendance, it seems unlikely that the instructional change objectives or student learning objectives could be reached.

The school's plan lists Student Performance Goals that identify the specific gains in MCAS results desired and they are precisely defined in measurable terms. For example, a math student performance goal states "Increase the percent correct on the patterns, relations and algebra section of the Math MCAS test from 0% to 30% in 2005, (0 students out of 30 on the MCAS 2003 would need to increase to 10 students out of 30.) and from 30% to 35% in 2006, (10 students out of 30 would need to increase to 13 students out of 30.)" In order to assess progress toward this goal, the school must conduct an item analysis to identify whether this goal was met, since the goal is not to move students into one of four performance categories but, rather, to improve in one section of the math test. The school could potentially fail to meet the stated goal, given the school's low enrollment numbers in testing grades or the pervasive attendance problem that affects the number of students taking the test. In 2004, zero students took the 6th grade MCAS math test, 17 took the 8th grade test and six took the 10th grade test.

The student learning objectives in the MCDI SIP focus on teaching and learning. They reference strands from the Massachusetts Frameworks. In ELA, one student learning objective states, "All students will be able to demonstrate the ability to write with a clear focus, coherent organization, and sufficient details." In the judgment of the panel, however, these learning objectives are too broad and do not offer sufficient guidance as to the particular skills that prevent students from writing with clear focus, using coherent organization and including sufficient details. This objective does not specify why students are not writing with clear focus from among a number of possible explanations: Is it because they have problems with comprehension? Do they lack vocabulary or lack critical thinking skills? Do students simply lack writing stamina and omit sufficient details? Without greater detail, MCDI data does not provide sufficient information about student learning gaps to suggest reasons for poor performance more precise than their broad goals such as the one stated above.

Additional student learning objectives are equally broad, vague and hard to measure. One ELA objective declares that students will "...demonstrate knowledge of scope and sequence through appropriate use of vocabulary in writing and reading." This outcome objective represents a target that is not clearly defined. What tool can determine "appropriate use of vocabulary," or how will it be determined that students "demonstrated knowledge of scope and sequence"? The objectives

are too broad and, without focus, the panelists concluded they cannot serve as a useful guide for monitoring the impact of the school's initiatives.

MCDI data analysis led the school to identify broadly what students cannot do but they did not identify why. The sole reason for poor student performance identified by the district and the school is attendance and the learning gaps that result. The theme woven throughout the plan is that if students' attendance improves, so would their performance. While this is a logical argument, it was unclear to the panel what the school or the district has done to address the issue of attendance. Teachers interviewed expressed frustration in receiving conflicting information from the district as to the contents they could include in their SIP. Therefore, after the SIP was completed with goals addressing weaknesses in ELA and math, the district gave the school a mandate to include an additional goal addressing attendance and behavior with a 10-day deadline to submit. Teachers interviewed felt they did not adequately address the single most important issue the school has, and the biggest contributor to low student performance. They wished for more time to adequately address issues of attendance in the school's SIP. Further, the panel asked all stakeholders interviewed if a plan (aside from the SIP) had ever been created to address attendance at MCDI. Everyone responded "no."

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

No. While the plan lists some strategies that would likely lead to student improvement, their implementation is hindered by lack of staff training in and limited knowledge among the faculty of the strategies listed in the school's plan. Additional strategies focus on teacher instruction and modeling and do not directly address student learning needs. Even if implemented, they are not likely to lead to improvement. Further, until the school comes to terms with the "learning gaps" students bring and address those gaps in their SIP, the plan cannot serve as a sound tool for improvement since it does not reflect the needs of the school's student population.

The Instructional Change Objectives list few research-based strategies with potential for improvement. Without knowing what was already in place, it is difficult for the panel to determine which strategies have been part of standard practice and which are new. Appendix 11 on page 41 of the SIP contains an empty page, where the school had an opportunity to outline "Current/New Strategies" to use for each performance goal and its corresponding objectives—student learning and instructional change objectives. Strategies such as the Pittsburgh Model (9 Principles of Learning), Research for Better Teaching (RBT), and Links (graphic organizers) were adopted by the district several years ago. Six- to nine-year veteran teachers at MCDI remember being trained in the preceding strategies a "while back." Without program evaluation data on what teachers have been doing in the classroom before the plan was developed, it will be very difficult to measure the impact of the Pittsburgh model, or any of the many strategies outlined in the plan, on student achievement. It is difficult to say whether implementing the principles of the Pittsburgh model now would have its intended effect. The Panel Review visit did not allow ample time to explore the issue of current vs. new strategies used. Teachers' lack of recent familiarity with the strategies explains why they are not universally implementing them. Additional strategies such as Creating Independent Strategies for Success (CRISS), think-

a-loud and rubrics – while promising ways to improve learning – are limited by teacher’s reports of less familiarity creating rubrics, using think-a-loud and incorporating CRISS strategies.

Aside from the few research-based strategies the plan lists, the remaining strategies consist of teachers providing a wide variety of opportunities with, or modeling and instructing in, the identified areas of weakness. The wording in the Instructional Change Objectives – mainly, teaching and modeling – indicates that there is no expectation that teacher practice will vary from existing practice (teaching and modeling). Therefore, there is little likelihood that student performance will change if teacher performance remains the same.

MCDI did not provide an in-depth causal analysis or understanding of the reasons for poor student performance. Nor is there any summative or formative evaluation of teacher strengths and weaknesses in implementing district curricula or differentiating instruction in these small classroom settings. As mentioned in earlier sections of this report, all stakeholders readily identify student’s shortcoming – gaps in learning – as the main cause for student weaknesses. The panel understands that students could demonstrate gaps due to absenteeism. It was harder to understand, however, why these gaps have not been addressed in the past nor are addressed in the current school improvement plan. The school’s plan should reflect the unique issues the school deals with, and in the panelists’ judgment, this plan failed to do so. Instead the plan reads, “If current absenteeism were effectively addressed, this could have major impact on student performance.” Simply stating students’ deficiencies as “learning gaps” and not addressing the learning gaps will not be sufficient to raise student achievement.

Though it is not reflected in the plan, when school leaders were asked to explain the reasons for poor student performance at MCDI, the response was that teachers are “not covering all the material in the curriculum” or that “the curriculum is not taught adequately.” This causal analysis of the causes for poor student performance did not make it into the school’s SIP but potentially offers a realistic explanation and manageable solution for why gaps exist. Attention to instructional causes could result in instructional change objectives that address teacher knowledge of curriculum and teachers’ adherence to a scope and sequence to ensure material is covered and, as a result, yield gain in student achievement.

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

No. The school improvement plan has significant deficiencies. Most notable among the deficiencies is the failure to adequately address attendance problems and the effects chronic absenteeism has on students’ learning. The shortcoming in analysis fails to establish specific instructional strategies to address identified student weaknesses, meaningful timelines and measurable progress benchmarks. There is no clear component of the plan that provides for periodic review and possible revision of the plan on the basis of student achievement information gained during the year.

The school's plan is 80 pages long. While the SIP includes all the necessary components of an improvement plan, teachers at MCDI described it as "cumbersome, huge, overly complicated, overdone, too much in the plan and overwhelming." Teachers reported the size of the SIP was a barrier to implementation. While the SIP is written clearly, it is repetitive (as this report will expand on in this section).

The action plan of the SIP includes five categories: 1) activities; 2) who is responsible; 3) resources needed; 4) specific timeline; and 5) measures of implementation. The action plan lists activities teachers will do, such as "Teachers will model and share strategies of Academic Rigor and Thinking Curriculum (Pittsburgh)," and "Teachers will model and share strategies of Organizing for Effort and Success (Pittsburgh)." These activities are not linked to the instructional change objectives listed: "Teachers will model the proper use of formal vocabulary across the scope and sequence at grade level," and "Teachers will provide direct instruction in analyzing word meaning through roots, prefixes, and suffixes." It is not clear to the panel how the activities listed in the action plan align to the instructional change objectives. How do teachers use "academic rigor and thinking curriculum" to teach vocabulary, or how do they "organize for effort and success" to teach word meaning? The activities listed in the SIP are not likely to directly impact student learning to any great extent because they are not focused on instructional practices that are directed at acquiring specific academic skills. Rather, the instructional changes refer to the routines and tasks teachers carry out to manage instruction but not to the content of their instruction.

Other sections of the action plan are generic across all the instructional change objectives. For example, "All teachers and Principal" are listed as the "person responsible" for every activity. The same activities, resources and measures were cut and pasted across six action plans listed in the SIP. Further, it is not clear what the action plan is monitoring – the activities or the resources needed. Under the "measurement" column, the plan lists, "Receipt of materials," but the instructional activity this is monitoring is, "Teachers will model and share strategies of Organizing for Effort and Success." The resources needed for this activity include, "Obtain up to date State Frameworks, District Scope and Sequence and Instructor Syllabus." In the panel's judgment, the action plan is monitoring whether the school has received its resources rather than monitoring instructional change objectives listed as activities in the action plan. Another example of resources needed, "Materials to create storage and record keeping devices essential to monitoring and supporting student engagement," which is being measure by "Classroom record keeping devices in use in the classroom." While some alignment exists between resources needed and measure of implementation, there is no alignment between instructional change objectives and measure of implementation. In the panel's judgment, the school has neither created an action plan that will help them implement instructional change nor identified how to measure the impact of the change they may implement.

The "Student Learning Benchmarks/Assessment Checklist" is one of the weakest sections of the plan. The column entitled "Targeted skill or concept" should list what students are expected to do. However, it lists what teachers will do. For example "All teachers will model and instruct in the appropriate use of standard English conventions in revising and editing in writing." The school identified broad student learning objectives, weakly connected to instructional change objectives that resulted in a list of things teachers will do rather than student benchmarks or

student outcomes. The benchmark calendar lists very vague and not clearly defined levels of student performance – for example “Effective writing samples...”, “Effective use of vocabulary...”, “Students will show diversity of thought and philosophies when discussing...”, “Effective use of standard English...”. The benchmark calendar fails to identify skills students are expected to achieve nor a way to measure student skills. The MCDI SIP lacks a logical connection between action steps and expected outcomes. The panelists concluded that if this connection is unclear to the panel, it is likely unclear also for a teacher. The plan as currently constructed is inadequate to allow teachers to have a clear idea of what teaching changes to make to improve student learning and whether the instructional changes will lead to improved student performance.

Every person interviewed, from the district to the CEO of Mass Career Development Institute Inc., listed things they are doing to address the attendance problem at MCDI. While many things are being done to address attendance, they appear to be *ad hoc* and not coordinated into a plan for cohesive understanding and follow through by all staff members at MCDI. This list is not organized in a coherent plan that could serve as a powerful strategy to combat the attendance problem. For example, near the entrance of the building panel members noticed an invitation to a “Pizza Party” for students who had perfect attendance this term. In addition, parents reported receiving letters and phone calls from the school to report their child’s absence. Three new initiatives taken on this year to improve attendance are:

- 1) Bi-monthly meetings with members of the department of youth services, department of social services, probation department, CEO and Board member of MCDI Inc., and the school leader. The school is trying to put pressure on students to attend school through other organizations—DYS, DSS, courts—that also require school attendance.
- 2) A new intake process is in place. Students and parents are interviewed to get a sense of how important school is to them and both parent and student sign contracts. Thus far, the attendance of 18 students who entered the school through this new process is 82 percent.
- 3) A new advisee program matches four to eight students with a staff member at the school to help ensure their academic success by promoting relationships that could encourage school attendance.

In addition, the school starts at 8:30 am, as opposed to other middle and high schools in the district, which start at 7:30 am. The school has instituted a mentoring program with Western New England College, in which college volunteers help MCDI students with homework. Parents also mentioned a mentor program that provided running shoes to their children. MCDI Inc. has a new CEO who hired a math tutor to work with students. Additionally, MCDI Inc. has a contract with the city of Springfield to create the metal covers that go over city trash bins; the project to make these bins is called “Junior Achievement.” Students from MCDI can apply to work on this project. The students selected have to maintain a set attendance record and, as an incentive for good attendance, their pay will jump from minimum wage to \$8.00 an hour. Finally, the district has facilitated communication between MCDI and a similar alternative school in the district that

serves the same population yet reports better attendance. While numerous initiatives to address attendance are new and others are ongoing, the school lacks an organized effort to systematically address attendance problems. Teachers' reports of staff perceptions at MCDI include: "The school is not ready to deal with the attendance problem because staff members accept the fact that on any given day they will have to teach only three out of 15 students on their class roster." Unless attendance is viewed as an obstacle to student achievement and not as a perk to teachers, it is unlikely the school will galvanize in its efforts to address attendance.

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

While the process used to create the SIP was inclusive, the end product is a long, cumbersome SIP that offers little guidance to teachers in what they need to do to address student gaps.

The school received a district mandate to create a school improvement plan. Teachers worked last spring from May-April, 2004. They initially met during their Tuesday staff-wide meetings that last 1 hour and 15 minutes. Staff reported dedicating 12 Tuesday meetings to the SIP. In addition, they also met a total of 10 Wednesdays after school for 2-3 hours each time, and a few Thursdays after school for a couple of hours. Raw MCAS data was provided to the school from the district. Teachers conducted an item analysis and report initially not understanding "what to look for." Discussions were led by the school leader and by a veteran teacher. Everyone was involved and felt pushed to accomplish a lot in little time. Teachers reported that the process was "collaborative between staff and that there was high dedication to complete the plan." In spite of teachers' lack of experience in writing a school improvement plan, teachers interviewed reported offering "their legitimate understanding of student gaps and their explanation for why those gaps exist." The original draft was submitted to the district in June 2004 and returned to the school for revisions. Initially, the school was told the SIP is an academic plan and should include only academic goals. The pervasive issue – attendance – for which students are assigned to the school was not included in the first draft of the plan. After the plan was written, the district told the staff that, in fact, they needed to include a goal that addressed behavior and attendance and left the school with a tight deadline of 10 days to complete the addition. Teachers in one focus group report feeling rushed to complete the behavior/attendance goals and not having sufficient time to give this goal the attention it needed to help the school address the attendance issue adequately.

Panel members concluded that the process by which the SIP was developed could support its successful implementation. Not all teachers, however, are implementing the plan. Some teachers expressed support for the plan, while others felt it was too long and cumbersome to use. In some cases, teachers felt the plan was still a work in progress and cited this as the reason for not implementing it. It was the panel's conclusions that even teachers who are willing to implement the plan would have to focus the plan's goals to reflect specific student skills, identify instructional changes needed to address the skills, link the instruction to strategies they are familiar with or had training in, and identify how student knowledge will be assessed for the plan to have meaningful impact on student achievement. As written, the plan is unlikely to improve student performance.

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

No. While support for the school leader's managerial skills were reported by faculty, parents and district leaders, there is less confidence or support for his instructional leadership. Further, staff views the plan as a work in progress and one that does not address the unique issues the school faces with their "at-risk" population. Staff buy-in is, therefore, evolving without the depth to drive robust improvement effort. The lack of a systematic approach for monitoring instruction places limited accountability on teachers for implementation. While all district leaders interviewed articulate attendance as the main obstacle to student performance, they misinformed the school and limited their ability to adequately address attendance in their school improvement plan. From comments of school leaders and staff, the district does not have – nor has ever had – a district plan to deal with the serious attendance issues at MCDI. The school's original mission and the ability to carry it out have changed dramatically over the years, yet student assignment to the school remains the same.

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

In both faculty surveys and in teacher interviews, there is support expressed by the faculty for the school principal. Parents interviewed also uttered their positive opinion of the school leader. MCDI staff has confidence in the school leaders' managerial practices, but less confidence in his instructional leadership.

The school leader is described by the staff as "forthright and dedicated." In addition, teachers interviewed believe that he is a "realist—realizes and understands the population the school has," that he "engages students, and does not stall when there is an issue," and that he "wants to get kids out of this category [at risk of dropping out of school] by helping students make wise choices, such as attending school." Students interviewed said they "respect the school leader" and report that "he is visible in the halls and in their classrooms daily." In addition, both students and teachers report, "The school leader will engage students but will discipline them as well." District personnel describe the school leader as "engaged and participat[ing] in before- and after-school meetings."

There is less strong evidence that the school leader can offer regular oversight of instructional practices. One teacher interviewed commented, "He is good with compliance and behavior issues but does not offer much to teachers to better themselves." The impact of his instructional leadership was unclear to the panel. He is supportive of his teachers and resourceful. While he can find resources that teachers' need, he cannot provide it himself. In interviews, he reported to the panel his interest in taking a "non-intrusive" approach to walk-throughs and feedback. There appears to be an informal system in place for monitoring teachers' instructional practice and providing feedback. While one teacher reported receiving feedback about student engagement, the majority (nine out of 10) teachers interviewed could not give specific examples of instructional feedback they received. Since the feedback is oral, there are no records of teacher feedback for review by the panel. The school leader does not use a checklist when he conducts walk-throughs but explains that he keeps a mental note of what he wants to look for and what he

sees. In response to the panelists' question, "If a teacher is struggling, what do you do?" the school leader responded, "The Collaborative Professional Development Teachers (CDPT) help struggling teachers." His limitation in the ability to guide teachers to improve their instructional practice contributed to the panel's lack of confidence in the plan's impact.

There is a clear mission articulated by all stakeholders that this school's purpose is "...to keep students in school and off the street," but not as clear an understanding of how to keep students in school. As mentioned in previous sections of this report, there is an ad hoc list of actions the school is taking to address the attendance issue, but they are not organized in a plan nor serve as the guiding document for the entire staff to address the issue of attendance.

The school leader has created additional time for teachers to have unstructured team meeting time to discuss issues related to their students and program. As a result, teachers are involved in decision-making. For example, the middle school team wrote a behavior management plan that is supported by the school leader and implemented by all teachers across the two middle school programs. The plan (11 pages long) lists staff responsibilities such as familiarizing themselves with each student Individual Educational Plan (IEP). Student requirements include taking responsibility and earning all rights and privileges. In addition, the plan includes a five-level system of behavior management resulting in points students earn to move in and out of levels. Infractions and interventions are listed as well as common problems and solutions how to address them. The middle school teachers decided to tackle behavior by creating a plan. However, there is no evidence that teachers will address attendance issues in a plan.

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

No. This is the first year MCDI has had to write a SIP and the plan is viewed as a work in progress and one that does not address the unique issues the school faces with their "at-risk" population. Because the original analysis of student performance data was not thorough enough to uncover the root causes of poor student performance, the remedial strategies do not address the core instruction and are not clearly student-centered initiatives. Staff buy-in is, therefore, evolving without the depth to drive robust improvement effort. Further the lack of a systematic approach for monitoring instruction demands limited accountability from teachers for the plan's implementation.

Staff agree with the academic needs identified in the SIP but feel the plan does not address the real issue – attendance. While the plan has a behavior goal that addresses attendance, the staff did not feel it was adequate nor meet school needs. The goal reads, "All students will arrive to school daily, on time and stay for the complete day." The instructional change objective for this goal is, "A) Teachers will model preparation for daily assignments. B) Teachers will model effective effort in classroom presentations. C) Teachers will provide examples of course content and classroom expectations that link real world scenarios." Neither the action plan for this goal nor the benchmark calendar list any of the initiatives the panel heard from various interviews that the school is undertaking to address attendance as outlined in the previous section of this report. Teachers reported having to add a behavior goal as a mandate from the district after the majority of the plan was completed. Because the staff at MCDI was given 10 days by the district to

incorporate an attendance goal, as written, the goal does not outline any reasonable strategies that teachers will take to collectively address attendance. Panel members heard teachers explain and read in the SIP student weaknesses explained as “measurable gaps in students’ abilities prior to arrival at MCDI.” However, the Behavior/Attendance Goal does not address any remediation the school will provide students to address the learning gaps with which they enter. While the school is quick to identify learning gaps as the main obstacle to student achievement, they are not as quick to articulate a solution in their SIP. In the panel’s judgment, the school’s climate is one of acceptance of poor attendance rather than one focused on combating it.

One concern the panel voiced regarding implementation is the limited training teachers have to implement strategies. The team interviewed 10 out of 12 teachers at the school, and not one teacher reported having been trained in all the researched-based strategies listed in the plan. Some teachers had been trained in one or two of the strategies and a few teachers (mainly new teachers) had no training at all. A review of the school’s Professional Development calendar includes training for a few principles that comprise the Pittsburgh model and RBT. In the panel’s judgment, there is insufficient knowledge of the strategies among the faculty aimed at student improvement, and whether teachers who will be trained soon could adequately apply new strategies at a level as to impact achievement. In addition to issues of teacher training around key strategies listed in the plan, only four out of ten teachers interviewed report using the plan to guide their instruction, citing reasons as “it is not teacher friendly,” “too complicated; I wish we had a condensed version of the plan.” Overall, teachers could not articulate strategies listed in the plan, nor did they agree with them. Until there is real buy-in by staff that the plan can in fact impact student achievement, it is unlikely to promote improvement. The school has limited their personal accountability for student achievement by clearly and consistently stating the plan will work only for students who show up to school. This language was used by teachers, district and school leaders and can be read in the school’s improvement plan.

Classroom observations showed a range of evidence of vocabulary practice and vocabulary words walls, standards and goals listed on board, graphic organizers and modeling. Some teachers use word walls and post them weekly in the class, while others simply had charts with words hanging over a map. Without a structured system to give useful feedback to teachers on the quality of their work, teachers’ accountability to implement the plan is limited and will unlikely result in increased in student learning.

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

No. MCDI’s original mission and the ability to carry it out have changed dramatically over the years. Yet the district assignment of students with chronic absenteeism to MCDI remains the same. While all district leaders interviewed articulate attendance as the main obstacle to student performance, they misinformed the school and limited their ability to adequately address attendance in their school improvement plan. Further, the district does not have (nor has ever had) a district plan exclusively to deal with the serious attendance issues MCDI faces.

In the late 1980's, the district made an agreement with the juvenile courts not to expel students. Springfield Public Schools' alternative programs began housing students who otherwise would be expelled from district schools. Each of the five alternative programs serves a unique population. MCDI became the "drop-out prevention" program with an original mission, 10 years ago, to offer students with high truancy and a history of not attending school an environment where they could split their time 50/50 between academics and vocational shops. The skills learned through vocational shops allowed students the opportunity to work for MCDI Inc. after school. However, due to budgetary restraints and legal matters involving MCDI Inc., the school cannot provide all the vocational opportunities through shops as it once did. The district continues to assign truant students to MCDI without the added incentives of the vocational shops originally intended by its mission that gave students a "hook" to stay in school. The only additional benefit of MCDI reported by students is the smallness of the school. Aside from that, it is difficult for the panel to determine what is alternative about MCDI. In addition, MCDI Inc. currently has outdated shops, unqualified staff and no future plan of integrating MCDI students into vocational shops. The current vocational components are inadequate and consist of a computer center with eight computers – six that are not working. The computer lab and the media lab are in the same room with only two functioning computers. The culinary shop that the district said would start soon is assigning students to the school cafeteria, not a vocational shop with a chef teaching students culinary arts. Panel members interviewed the vocational shop teachers hired by MCDI Inc. who report not having a curriculum that would link shops to real-world jobs.

Although students are assigned to MCDI due to truancy, the district does not have a systematic plan to address MCDI's attendance issues. There has been a recent effort to facilitate conversations with another alternative school in the district, which deals with a similar student population as MCDI and reports better attendance.

District familiarity with the most pressing needs at MCDI and their articulation of the schools mission varied significantly. The team had four interviews with district personnel totaling seven district leaders. After these interviews, it was not clear to the panel to what extent the district understood or had knowledge of the most pressing needs at the school, since no one articulated them as listed in the SIP. Answers such as "[the plan] covers fundamentals to be successful in high school," while true at MCDI, could potentially be said of any plan in the district. Additional answers of "second language learners" as the most pressing needs at MCDI are not mentioned in the school's plan. In the panels' judgment, district leaders' familiarity with the school's needs seems critical to support its efforts toward improvement.

The district offers Performance Improvement Mapping training (14 sessions) to all schools in the district. The district's evaluation team of 10 people comprised of principals, district leaders, content curriculum directors and the school support specialist, review the school's plan. The SIP's evaluating team gave the MCDI SIP a rating of "mediocre" and asked for revisions. MCDI's school improvement plan was too broad and the evaluating team wanted it narrowed and focused. District personnel worked with the school's supervisor at various stages of the plan development and revisions, and the school supervisor communicated the information to teachers. Not all teachers involved in creating the plan corroborated the level of support described by the district.

The panel concluded that the input the school has received from the district has been largely around the product – formatting and revisions -- rather than on the process. While district leaders did not allow the school to include attendance issues in their SIP, they clearly and consistently articulate attendance as the main reason for poor student performance at MCDI. Due to the school receiving confusing directions as to the purpose and content of the plan, it limited the time the school had to add an attendance goal. It appears that the level of district support the school received was inadequate and resulted in a school improvement plan that is not likely to lead to improve student achievement. It was unclear to the panel how long the district has supported MCDI and how coordinated the support is. For example, the district “supervising principal” who oversees all five alternative schools, took no part in creating the school’s improvement plan.

District personnel report that “all schools receive equal support.” MCDI does not receive additional support. Equity is stressed but does not appear to be the reality. For example, the Collaborative Professional Development Teachers (CDPT), who also function as department heads for the alternative schools, are spread thinly. These CDPT teachers are supposed to work with the school but have been there sparingly this year because they are shared among other alternative schools. The school relies on them but cannot count on their presence. Interviews with the CDPT teachers indicated that the ELA and math teachers combined have been to the school less than 10 times this year. They also report that often they are there to drop off resources, not to work in the classroom with teachers. When the CDPT teachers are at the school, they do not stay all day. The school supervisor does not always know they have been to the school. While the district has support mechanisms in place, there is no systematic way to ensure that all schools are receiving equal support.

CONCLUSION

The panel concluded that the improvement plan developed by MCDI is inadequate to guide school efforts to raise student achievement. The panel based its judgment on a thorough review of the SIP that determined it does not have key components of a sound plan. Poor alignment of student learning objectives, followed by inadequate causal analysis, resulted in instructional change objectives that, as written, do not offer teachers a road map to improvement. The lack of a clear component of the plan that provides for periodic review and possible revision adds to the plan’s ineffectiveness to be the driving force for improved student achievement. In addition, the plan does not sufficiently address the school’s ongoing issue of poor attendance, but rather uses poor attendance as an excuse for poor performance. For this reason, the plan is not specific enough nor focused on students needs in a way that will lead to the major changes in instruction that are likely to have a positive impact on learning.

The school leader has the managerial skills to effectively manage the school, but may not provide the level of instructional oversight needed to implement the current plan and promote student achievement. Although the staff was intimately involved in creating the SIP, the plan does not address student learning gaps and attendance as pressing needs staff agree upon, resulting in a lack of buy-in and limited implementation of the plan. The district’s support of the

school during the planning, writing and revisions stages of the SIP were insufficient and resulted in a plan that, as written, will be unlikely to have a positive impact on student performance. Furthermore, the district continues to assign students to MCDI regardless of the school's ability to deal with the unique population of students with high truancy problems. Therefore, under the stated conditions, the panel concluded that there is insufficient capacity to implement the SIP.

This first effort at school improvement has brought a new focus on student achievement at the school and on the need for a clear process of analysis and planning to guide improvement efforts. However, the current plan as written is a cumbersome, overly detailed document that does not address the real needs of the students at this school.

APPENDIX A
Team Members

Emilys Peña, Panel Chair, Project Manager, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

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

Jennie McGiverin, Panel Team Member, Vice Principal, McMahan School, Holyoke, MA

Maria A. Silvestri, Panel Team Member, Vice Principal, Ware High School, Ware School District, Ware, MA

APPENDIX B
UNDER-PERFORMING PANEL REVIEW SCHEDULE
Detailed Schedule for Review Panel School Site Visit

The times specified on the following schedule may be adjusted slightly to align with the daily schedule and practices in each of the schools being reviewed.

Day 1

- 9:00 – 9:30 a.m.* Panel chairperson and panel coordinator meet to discuss and clarify roles, prepare for the first team meeting, and review general logistics/schedule for the review. [location: hotel]
- 9:30 – 11:30 a.m.* **Team meeting # 1:** team meets for the first time to discuss each panelist’s individual analysis; team forms preliminary judgments on key questions. [location: hotel]
- 12:00—2:00 p.m.* Panelists meet with Principal (and one other school-based individual, if appropriate). [location: the school]
- 2:00 – 3:00 p.m.* Panelists meet with School Leadership Team
- 3:00 – 4:00 p.m.* Panelists meet with the district Superintendent (and Assistant Superintendent, if appropriate). [location: school]
- 4:30 – 6:00 p.m.* **Team meeting # 2:** panelists synthesize interview information, further define findings, prepare questions, and develop a team strategy for Day 2 of the review. [location: hotel]

Day 2

All activities take place in the school

- 7:30—8:00 a.m.* Panelists meet with the Principal
- 8:00—8:30 a.m.* Panelists meet with the School Council
- 8:30—9:00 a.m.* Panelists meet with Focus Groups. The Panel Review Coordinator and the Principal will identify participants for each Focus Group. The groups will be organized, as appropriate, to include groups of individuals who can respond to questions designed for parents, students, classroom teachers, curriculum facilitators, content-area specialists, grade-level instructors, or other specific inquiry groups.

Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D	Panelist E
Focus Group	Focus Group	Focus Group	Focus Group	Focus Group

9:00—11:00 a.m. Classroom observations and teacher interviews*

	Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D	Panelist E
9-10 a.m.	Observe teacher 1 and teacher 2	Observe teacher 3 and teacher 4	Observe teacher 5 and teacher 6	Observe teacher 7 and teacher 8	Observe teacher 9 and teacher 10
10-11 a.m.	Interview teacher 1 and teacher 2 individually	Interview teacher 3 and teacher 4 individually	Interview teacher 5 and teacher 6 individually	Interview teacher 7 and teacher 8 individually	Interview teacher 9 and teacher 10 individually

11 a.m.—12:30 p.m. **Team meeting # 3:** panelists meet to discuss findings so far and to plan the remainder of the day (working lunch)

12:30—1:00 p.m. Panelists use time as needed to analyze findings and to gather more information.

1:00—2:00 p.m. Panelists meet with teachers in groups*; consultant co-chair is free to work on report

	Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D	Panelist E
1:00-1:30	Teacher	Focus Group 1	Teacher	Focus Group 3	Prepare report
1:30-2:00	Teacher	Focus Group 2	Teacher	Focus Group 4	

2:00—2:30 p.m. Closing meeting with the principal to discuss next steps (all panelists are present)

2:30—5:00 p.m. **Team meeting # 4:** panelists deliberate and form conclusions