

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

### **Accelerated Learning Lab Worcester Public Schools**

#### **Executive Summary**

A Fact Finding Review conducted by a team convened by the Massachusetts Department of Education took place at the Accelerated Learning Lab (A.L.L.) school from February 14-17, 2005. The team was charged with determining the root causes of the school's designation as under-performing and analyzing the prospects for improvement. During the Fact Finding visit, the team conducted 36 classroom observations, met with more than 80 school and district staff and leaders, and examined a variety of school documents, including lesson plans, minutes of meetings, curriculum documents, and program information, as well as documents previously supplied by the Massachusetts Department of Education. The Fact Finding Team found many areas of strength, including a modern, bright, spacious facility; a comfortable and respectful school climate; a staff open to new ideas and guidance; and a variety of initiatives that have the potential to improve student achievement.

In addition to its strengths, A.L.L. has several areas for improvement. The school currently lacks an overarching, cohesive vision for this unique K-12 school. It is not clear to what extent this school should be three semi-autonomous programs within one building and to what extent it should be a unified K-12 program. It is vital to answer this question as it has ramifications for how roles and responsibilities will be defined across the school. While the team saw pockets of excellent instruction, overall instruction needs improvement with particular attention to standards-based planning, rigorous classroom activities, and in-depth questioning to elicit high levels of student thinking. Leadership at both the district and school level must improve their monitoring of instruction and the many initiatives that are currently within the school. More than any other factor, the lack of monitoring instruction and initiatives is hindering the school's and district's potential to raise student performance. Without regular review of progress and fidelity of implementation, there is no way to make mid-course corrections to ensure that programs and instruction are meeting students' needs.

#### **I: Curriculum and Instruction**

The Fact Finding Team conducted 36 classroom observations during the visit and found a wide range of quality of both instruction and learning outcomes: 32.5 percent of lessons seen were rated below average; 36.5 percent were rated average; and 31 percent were determined to be of high quality. Based on classroom observations, interviews and the review of school documents, the Fact Finding Team concluded that, while the school has taken a number of steps toward improving teaching and learning, it needs to develop a shared vision for high quality instruction and a much stronger explicit link to standards within each lesson. The school must answer the questions: What does good instruction look like at A.L.L.? How do we know that units and lessons are clearly linked to state standards?

To answer these questions, the school has some foundations to build upon:

- District curriculum guides contain clear statements of approach, including explanations of approaches to literacy and examples of tools that can be used by teachers, such as graphic organizers.
- Extra time is provided for English Language Arts and mathematics instruction.
- Ongoing assessments in literacy and mathematics are used to regroup some students by need.
- Staffing changes have been made to provide extra assistance to certain students.
- Adoption at some grade levels of standards-based, proven instructional programs, such as Everyday Math.

Areas for improvement included:

- While existing curriculum documents have the strengths mentioned above and some of the adopted programs provide very specific guidance and pacing charts, there is not a scope and sequence document that provides sufficient guidance across the grade levels and subjects.
- While regrouping practices create more homogenous groups for mathematics and literacy instruction at some grade levels, differentiation within these groups is not yet occurring.
- The school lacks a shared vision of quality instruction that would include a common vocabulary for instructional practices and clear expectations for good teaching.
- Based on the team's classroom visits, lesson objectives are often not made clear to students and seldom have an explicit link to standards.
- Programs and services to meet individual student needs depend too heavily, in the opinion of the Fact Finding Team, on a pull-out model versus an inclusion model.

To build upon its current strengths to areas for improvement, the Fact Finding Team recommends that the school take the following steps:

- The District should review guidance at each grade level and provide supplementary documentation where it finds critical gaps. In doing so, a guiding question should be: What concise documentation would help teachers to make good instructional choices week to week and month to month?
- Build on current use of assessment data to regroup students by helping teachers to use the same data to differentiate their instruction *within* each lesson, not just for regrouping purposes.
- Develop a shared vision for good instruction per the principal's plan to develop a set of "essential practices."
- Develop a much more explicit use of standards and statement of lesson objectives as a common practice across the school.
- Consider having Exit Exhibitions at each grade level or at least between elementary, middle and high school programs so that grade level expectations must be demonstrated. This may also serve as a way to create a K-12 identity for the school. Perhaps assessment is the thread that makes A.L.L. a cohesive organization.

- Move toward greater use of inclusion practices for support of students identified for intervention and limited English proficient students.

## **II: School Climate**

The climate within the new, bright, spacious building of the A.L.L. school is generally positive and conducive to learning. None of the statistics around attendance and discipline measures was of concern to the Fact Finding Team, and the interactions observed between and among adults and students reflected warmth and respect. The two areas that arose in interviews as ones needing to be addressed to preserve high staff morale are:

- Adequate common planning time for middle and elementary school teachers. While the high school benefits from three hours of structured time together each week, K-8 faculty has very little, if any, common planning time.
- More regular visibility and support from administrators. Leaders need to be more aware of what is happening in the classrooms, and teachers need increased guidance on their instruction.

## **III: Organizational Structures and Management**

There are a number of organizational and management structures in place that serve as a strong foundation for school improvement:

- Adequate time allocated for instruction; in particular the addition of Intervention blocks and extra time for English language arts and mathematics.
- Availability of most essential materials and resources (with the exception of textbooks in some courses).
- Professional development to support teachers with the implementation of initiatives.

Focus group discussions and interviews led to the identification of the following areas for improvement:

- Increasing meeting times for school administration to focus on areas of educational priority.
- Ensuring, through schedule revision and productive use of educational support staff, that there is adequate common planning time for elementary and middle school teachers to collaborate.
- Developing explicit standards or benchmarks to monitor instructional planning and execution.
- Providing ongoing monitoring of and support for the implementation of initiatives beyond the first phase of introduction.
- Defining the roles and responsibilities of support and administrative personnel.
- Providing models of excellent teaching through the literacy coaches and other teachers who demonstrate differentiated learning techniques and other high quality teaching methods.

## **IV: Leadership and Planning**

The principal, who has served in this role since mid-September only, is committed to the success of the school; this became evident to the Fact Finding Team in interviews with her and with her staff. She holds a philosophy of shared decision-making and wants stakeholders to have a voice in and take ownership of school matters. Building on this philosophy, the principal should orchestrate the following actions that would enhance the prospects for improved student achievement:

- Develop a vision and mission that are grounded in student learning objectives and direct all aspects of school operations.
- Define the roles of instructional leaders to allow them sufficient time to provide guidance and support to teachers.
- Use assessment data to review current learning objectives and develop a concise list of K-12 learning priorities.
- Create standards-based expectations of staff that are grounded in learning priorities.
- Conduct an inventory and audit to prioritize programs and initiatives. Decide which ones support learning objectives and which can perhaps be eliminated.

## 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.

## **Accelerated Learning Lab School Profile**

### **Enrollment**

The Accelerated Learning Lab (A.L.L.) is the only school in Worcester that serves students in grades Pre-Kindergarten to 12. Over the last four years, enrollment at A.L.L. has slightly declined, from 888 in 2001 to 827 in 2004. There have also been small but noticeable changes in student demographics.

Between 2001 and 2004, the proportion of Hispanic students attending A.L.L. has slightly increased, from 39 percent in 2001 to 44 percent in 2004, while the percentage of White students has decreased from 38 to 33 percent over the same time. This year, 13 percent of students are reported as being in the Black subgroup, similar to the 12-14 percent reported in earlier years. Asian students currently make up 10 percent of the student population. In 2004, 86 percent of A.L.L. students were from low income families. This proportion is the highest of the previous three years, with a low of 76 percent being reported in 2002. In 2004, 19 percent of students are reported as being Limited English Proficient, up from 13 percent in 2002. This school year, 19 percent of students are receiving special education services, the same percentage as in 2003.

In 2004, A.L.L. registered an attendance rate of 94.6 percent, with students absent 9 days on average. The school's retention rate was 6.3 percent in 2003, the last year for which this data is available. Out-of-school suspensions were reported at 12.5 percent, more than twice the state's 6.1 average. The rate of 2003 in-school suspensions was reported at 0.9 percent, and the school's exclusion rate was 1.2 percent.

### **Staffing**

The 2004-2005 Accelerated Learning Lab's staffing report indicates that the school is composed of 3 administrators, 69 teachers, 2 guidance staff members and 1 school psychologist. Approximately 30 percent of the educators at the school have been there for three or fewer years. Just over 92 percent of teachers are licensed in their current teaching area.

### **MCAS Overview**

Students at the Accelerated Learning Lab are assessed in English language arts (ELA) in grades 3, 4, 7 and 10 and in mathematics in grades 4, 6, 8 and 10. The school has not made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in ELA since AYP determinations were first issued in 1999. The school

has not made AYP in mathematics, with the exception of 2003 when A.L.L. made AYP in mathematics in the aggregate. In the school's Cycle III End-of-Cycle Report (2003-2004), the school did not make AYP in ELA in the aggregate or for three of its five reported subgroups: Free/Reduced Price Lunch, Hispanic, and White.<sup>1</sup> In mathematics, the school failed to make AYP in the aggregate and for all of its five reported subgroups: Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Free/Reduced Price Lunch, Hispanic and White. The school is currently identified for Restructuring in ELA and Improvement in mathematics.

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

### **GRADE 3**

#### **Regular Education**

At the grade 3 level in Reading, the performance of regular education students has been variable. In 2002, 60 percent of students performed at the Proficient level, 32 percent were at the Needs Improvement level and 8 percent were at the Warning level. In 2003, the percentage of Proficient students decreased to 25 percent, while the percentage of Warning students increased to 33 percent. In 2004, 21 percent were Proficient, 63 percent were in Needs Improvement and 16 percent were in Warning.

#### **Special Education**

The results for Special Education students in grade 3 reading are variable; this variation correlates with the A.L.L. sample sizes (11-16 students) in each year. In 2004, 17 percent were Proficient, 42 percent were in Needs Improvement and 42 percent were in Warning. In 2003, 67 percent were in Needs Improvement and 33 percent were in Warning.

#### **Limited English Proficient**

Data for LEP students in grade 3 Reading is available for 2003 and 2004 only. In 2003, 45 percent of the 11 students assessed scored in Needs Improvement and 55 percent were in Warning. In 2004, 5 percent of the 20 assessed were at the Proficient level, 75 percent were in Needs Improvement and 20 percent were in Warning.

### **GRADE 4**

#### **Regular Education**

Results for regular education students at the grade 4 level in ELA are variable. In 2001, 23 percent of students scored in the Proficient range, 39 percent in Needs Improvement and 39 percent in Warning. In 2003, 2 percent scored in Advanced, 19 percent in Proficient, 57 percent in Needs Improvement and 21 percent in Warning. In 2004, there was a slight decrease in the percent in Proficient and a substantial increase in the percent in Warning. In

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

that year, 2 percent were Advanced, 15 percent were Proficient, 49 percent scored in Needs Improvement and 34 percent were in Warning.

### **Special Education**

Due to the small Special Education population at this grade level, data are not available for all years. In 2003, 9 percent of the 11 students assessed were Proficient, 36 percent were in Needs Improvement and 55 percent were in Warning. This represented improvement from 2002, when 74 percent of the 19 students assessed were in Warning and 26 percent were in Needs Improvement.

### **Limited English Proficient**

Data for this subgroup are available for 2003 and 2004. In 2004, 6 percent of the 18 students assessed were Proficient, 33 percent were in Needs Improvement and 61 percent were in Warning. In 2003, 10 percent of the 10 students assessed were Proficient, 50 percent were in Needs Improvement and 40 percent were in Warning.

## **GRADE 7**

### **Regular Education**

Results for regular education students in grade 7 ELA indicate a general improvement trend, with more students scoring in the Proficient range and fewer scoring in the Warning range. In 2004, 60 percent of students scored in the Proficient range, 36 percent in Needs Improvement and 4 percent in Warning. In 2002, 6 percent were Advanced, 35 percent were Proficient, 51 percent were in Needs Improvement and 8 percent scored in Warning.

### **Special Education**

Results for Special Education students in grade 7 ELA are stable between 2002 and 2004. In each of these three years, 50 percent of students scored in the Warning range and 40-44 percent scored in Needs Improvement. In 2004, 1 of the 10 students assessed was Proficient.

### **Limited English Proficient**

Data for the LEP subgroup in grade 7 ELA are available for 2004 only. That year, 27 percent scored in the Proficient range, 53 percent in Needs Improvement and 20 percent in Warning.

## **GRADE 10**

### **Regular Education**

At the grade 10 level in ELA, scores for regular education students are variable. In 2004, 24 percent of students were Advanced, 35 percent were Proficient, 29 percent were in Needs Improvement and 12 percent were Failing. These results are not as strong as those from 2002, when the Advanced and Failing percentages were similar to 2004 but the percent Proficient was 45. Compared to 2003, the 2004 results are equivocal; in 2003, 6 percent were Failing, 42 percent were in Needs Improvement, 35 percent were Proficient and 16 percent were Advanced.

**Special Education**

Data for the Special Education subgroup in grade 10 ELA are available for 2001 and 2004 only. In 2004, 25 percent of the 12 students assessed were Proficient, 33 percent were in Needs Improvement and 42 percent were Failing. In 2001, 33 percent were in Needs Improvement and 67 percent were Failing.

**Limited English Proficient**

Fewer than 10 Limited English Proficient students were assessed in grade 10 ELA; as such, results for this subgroup are not available.

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

At the grade 4 level in mathematics, scores for regular education students are somewhat variable, indicating a performance improvement from 2002 to 2003 and a decline in performance from 2003 to 2004. In 2002, 4 percent of students were Advanced, 7 percent were Proficient, 32 percent were in Needs Improvement and 57 percent were in Warning. In 2003, the percentage in Warning decreased to 21, while the percent in Proficient increased to 19. In 2004, the percentage of students scoring in the Warning level returned to 54 percent, and percentage in Proficient decreased to 5. In 2004, 41 percent of the regular education students assessed were at the Needs Improvement level.

**Special Education**

In 2003, 55 percent of the 11 Special Education students assessed in grade 4 mathematics were in Needs Improvement and 45 percent scored at the Warning level. In 2002, 16 percent of the 19 students assessed were in Needs Improvement and 84 percent were in Warning. In other years, fewer than 10 students were assessed.

**Limited English Proficient**

Results for LEP students in grade 4 mathematics are available for 2003 only. In that year, 10 percent of the 10 students assessed scored in the Proficient range, 40 percent were in Needs Improvement and 50 percent were in Warning.

**GRADE 6****Regular Education**

Results for regular education students in grade 6 mathematics indicate a performance decline between 2002 and 2004. In 2002, 3 percent of students were Advanced, 17 percent were Proficient, 32 percent were in Needs Improvement and 47 percent were in Warning. In 2004, 2 percent were Advanced, the percent in Proficient decreased to 9, and the percentage scoring in Warning increased to 60.

**Special Education**

Results for Special Education students in grade 6 mathematics improved slightly from 2003 to 2004. In 2004, 5 percent of students were Proficient, 10 percent were in Needs Improvement and 86 percent were at the Warning level. In 2003, the percentage of students scoring in Warning was 94; the remaining 6 percent of students scored in the Proficient range. In 2001 and 2002, 96 percent of the students assessed were in the Warning range.

**Limited English Proficient**

Only one year of data are available for LEP students in grade 6 mathematics. In 2004, 10 percent of the 20 students assessed were Proficient, 5 percent were in Needs Improvement and 85 percent were in Warning.

**GRADE 8****Regular Education**

At the grade 8 level in mathematics, results for regular education students indicate a three-year trend towards reducing the number of students scoring at the Warning level. In 2002, 3 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 11 percent were Proficient, 28 percent were in Needs Improvement and 58 percent were in Warning. In 2003, the percent in Proficient increased to 21 and the percent in Warning decreased to 40. In 2004, 6 percent of the students were in the Advanced range, 19 percent were Proficient, 44 percent were in Needs Improvement and 31 percent were in Warning.

**Special Education**

The results for Special Education students in grade 8 mathematics show 80-93 percent of students scoring in the Warning range for all years, with the exception of 2002, when 60 percent were in that range. In 2003, 7 percent were in Needs Improvement and 93 percent were in Warning. In 2004, 20 percent were in Needs Improvement and 80 percent were in Warning. In each of the years for which data are available, 10 to 15 students were assessed.

**Limited English Proficient**

Data for LEP students in grade 8 mathematics are available for 2004 only. In that year, 18 percent of the 11 students assessed were in Needs Improvement and 82 percent were in Warning.

**GRADE 10****Regular Education**

Results for regular education students in grade 10 mathematics indicate a slight increase in the percentage of students in the Advanced and Proficient range over the past three years. In 2002, no students were Advanced, 23 percent were Proficient, 41 percent were in Needs Improvement and 36 percent were Failing. In 2003, 10 percent were Advanced and 23 percent were Proficient. That year, the percent scoring in the Failing range decreased to 23. In 2004, 12 percent of students were Advanced, 24 percent were Proficient, 35 percent were in Needs Improvement and 29 percent were Failing.

### **Special Education**

Only two years of data are available for Special Education students in grade 10 mathematics. In 2004, 33 percent of the 12 students assessed were Proficient, 42 percent were in Needs Improvement and 25 percent were Failing. In 2001, 8 percent of the 12 students assessed were in Needs Improvement and the remaining 92 percent were Failing.

### **Limited English Proficient**

Fewer than 10 LEP students were assessed in grade 10 mathematics in all years; as such, no results are available for this subgroup.

## **Key Domains of Inquiry**

### **I: Curriculum and Instruction**

The Fact Finding Team found that in the domain of Curriculum and Instruction, the district and school have been engaged in numerous initiatives to improve curriculum documentation, adopt standard-based programs and increase the amount of assessment data available to schools. The school and district can build upon these efforts to address low student performance at A.L.L. Next steps include further development of curriculum documents; a more explicit use of standards during planning, lesson delivery and assessment; a more explicit statement of expectations for good instruction; reexamination of how services are provided to students identified for intervention services and limited English proficient students. As discussed under the Leadership and Planning domain, the key to addressing these needs may be more monitoring and feedback on current initiatives rather than adoption of new ones.

The Fact Finding Team examined curriculum documents, spoke with central office curriculum staff and asked teachers about how they decide what to teach each day. The team examined the Worcester Benchmarks, the district's grade-level interpretation of the Massachusetts Frameworks. The Worcester Benchmarks document has a common format for all subject areas and grade levels. At each grade level, standards statements are listed. These statements represent the district's interpretation of what students should know and be able to do at the end of each grade level. The document does not provide any guidance on how the standards should be taught, nor does it provide examples of work that meets standard. The document solely makes a statement of what students should know and be able to do at each grade level.

In addition to the Worcester Benchmark document, there are curriculum guides. At present the Mathematics guide is under revision. The Fact Finding Team examined the guides across the available subject areas and met with central office personnel to discuss their purpose. The documents provide philosophical statements, general instructional approaches, such as Balanced Literacy and suggested materials, such as graphic organizers. Worcester Benchmarks are embedded in the curriculum guides. The guides do not provide direction on how or in what sequence to address the benchmarks across the school year, except in the most general terms.

Completing the school's curriculum are the adopted programs. In some cases, such as Everyday Math and Houghton Mifflin's A Nation's Choice, specific guidance is provided as to what should be taught and in what sequence it should be taught.

In the estimation of the Fact Finding Team, a teacher could glean from the curriculum guides what end-of-year standards are for each grade level and what general approaches should be used to teach those standards. The quality of guidance on how to plan month to month or week to week and what specific instructional strategies should be used in lessons varies greatly, depending on the specificity of the program materials at a given grade level. The Fact Finding Team urges the district to examine the thoroughness of guidance available at each grade level and, where necessary, supplement existing guidance with further documentation. This documentation could be referred to as a “scope and sequence,” and its components might include suggested strategies for teaching a certain topic, resources, and exemplars of student work and unit/lesson plans. While not a step-by-step guide, it should answer for teachers the questions, “What is the recommended sequence of units/lessons that I should consider in guiding my students to mastery of grade level standards by the end of the school year? What are the recommended approaches to teaching and assessing these standards?” The district is currently developing at least a part of this level of guidance by creating benchmark papers in English Language Arts.

Teachers at the A.L.L. school reported that they develop their syllabi and lesson plans based on the Massachusetts Frameworks and Worcester Benchmarks. Certain departments, such as mathematics, are developing their curriculum guides. However, based on the sample of classrooms visited by the team, there was little evidence of explicit references being made to unit or lesson objectives. Students were generally not being made aware of the explicit skills and content knowledge that they were expected to learn. For this reason, the Fact Finding Team recommends that curriculum documentation be further developed as part of a multi-pronged strategy to heighten awareness of and explicit reference to standards in daily classroom practice.

The quality of instruction varied to a large degree in the 36 classroom observations that the Fact Finding Team conducted. Whole group, teacher-centered instruction dominated classroom practices. Certain adopted programs, such as Houghton Mifflin’s A Nation’s Choice, which is used in grades K-3, call for small, flexible groups based on identified student needs. In her effort to improve student achievement in ELA and math, the principal has also started learning centers and Intervention blocks in the elementary grades. To meet the needs of diverse learners across the school, however, it is vital that the faculty determine the individual learning styles of their students and adapt their teaching methods accordingly. Moreover, since the A.L.L. school demographics have shifted from those of a magnet school to those of a neighborhood school, it is even more crucial that teachers continually revisit their instructional practices to ensure they are meeting their current pupils’ needs.

In the majority of classes seen, lesson objectives were stated but not written. Objectives were usually statements of activities and not statements of specific content and skills to be learned. This is a critical area for improvement; clear objectives that are tied to grade level standards set the stage for rigorous lessons.

Half or less of the lessons were considered by team members to be rigorous. In three different classes, students were allowed not to participate simply because they “did not feel like it.” When asked by a team member why a student did not have his book, the student replied that “if you

don't bring your book, you don't need to do the work." There was little evidence of probing questions to check for understanding and mastery. Most questions were factual and did not elicit higher-order thinking. A lot of rote work was observed where students were completing tasks such as cutting and pasting or copying long lists of vocabulary. In the classes where more challenging work was observed, team members witnessed students working at a good, independent pace and being encouraged to think aloud and to contribute questions and answers that reflected higher-order thinking. These "pockets of excellent teaching" exist at the A.L.L. school and could serve as excellent models of good instruction.

As a next step to improve the quality of instruction, the Fact Finding Team recommends that the school:

- Move forward with the principal's concept of developing "essential instructional practices" that make explicit what good instruction should look like at A.L.L. These essential practices should define a concise vocabulary that administrators and teachers can use to discuss instruction; they should provide exemplars from the pockets of outstanding instruction seen by the Fact Finding Team.

Multiple types of assessments are being used to determine student achievement: MCAS; commercially developed diagnostic tools, such as GRADE, DIBELS, DRA, SRI, STAR Math and soon-to-be introduced Measures of Academic Progress (MAP). Other promising assessment practices include writing portfolios and new Gateway assessments at the ninth grade.

Currently the commercial diagnostic assessments are largely used to regroup students for Intervention. This is a good first step. The new principal made significant efforts this fall to ensure that regrouping would occur for elementary students. As a next step, teachers must be assisted in using data to differentiate their teaching within a given group of students. In other words, breaking students down into more homogenous groups during part of the day is a good step, but even within those groups, the range of needs is great. Nonetheless, the majority of instruction seen by the team was whole-group instruction, which provided limited opportunity to push some students and remediate others within the same lesson.

In addition to using assessment data to further drive instruction, the A.L.L. school ought to consider the opportunity to use assessment to create a greater sense of K-12 identity. For example, Exit Exhibitions at the end of each grade level would require students to demonstrate through writing, presentation and projects that they have mastered key standards. A sequence of such exhibitions K-12 might provide a clear link between grade levels and the elementary, middle and high school programs that share the A.L.L. facility. This is a suggestion that seems apt because it addresses a key need to make standards more explicit and builds on the school's history of project-based learning under the Co-Nect initiative.

There is a large number of support staff to meet individual student needs, including English Language Arts and mathematics teachers; five literacy tutors in grades 1-5; a No Child Left Behind coach; two literacy coaches in the high school and middle school; a Reading First coach; four general SPED teachers, and several specialized teachers for the Deaf and Hard of

Hearing/Blind program. There are also two full-time S.E.I. teachers who work with grades K-5 and one part-time S.E.I. teacher for grades 6-12.

These instructional supports represent a significant amount of human resources. The efficiency of their deployment is discussed in the Organizational Structures and Management domain below. The Fact Finding Team had concerns about the general tendency of Intervention teachers and S.E.I. teachers to provide pull-out services rather than inclusion support. For example, S.E.I. staff pull students out of their classes except for the time when students in grades 3-8 are in READ 180. While the logic behind taking them out of class is that their level of English is extremely low, the school should consider the consequences of pulling children out of their regular classes:

- It sends the message to regular teachers that second language acquisition issues are not part of their core responsibility.
- It limits the influence the S.E.I. instructor has on regular classroom practice, especially given that there are many FLNE students in the regular population.
- It denies the student assistance in coping within the regular classroom, leaving him/her to navigate essentially alone when there.

Teachers use STAR Math and Everyday Math assessments to identify the students in the lower school who are struggling. Math Intervention teachers pull these students out of their regular classes and provide a parallel class for them. While team observers found the Intervention classes small and productive, they question whether this procedure is providing an equitable experience for these students. By being pulled out of their regular classes, they are being set up to form their own specialized groups, and it may prove difficult to reinstate them with their peers. This report in no way means to imply that these decisions have been made with anything but the best of intentions, and it was beyond the scope of the Fact Finding visit to determine whether these decisions have merit. However, the school's tendency to use pull out as a method for addressing individual needs should be carefully assessed. Is this creating the best possible learning environment for these children? Why is it superior to having Intervention teachers and S.E.I. staff work within the regular classroom? Do student assessments show that this approach is closing the gap for these students?

The Special Education Program serves a wide range of students at all levels. There are four general SPED teachers who offer inclusion support with some pull-out services. In addition, there are two resource rooms for grades 6-12. The A.L.L. school acquired a Behavioral Disorder class this year and also has a 9<sup>th</sup>-grade Emotional Support Program. The Deaf and Hard of Hearing/Blind program is well established with interpreters, primary teachers who have their own classrooms, and Inclusion teachers.

## II: School Climate

The walls of the spacious, bright, clean, and modern A.L.L. school building contain a climate that is generally positive, respectful, caring and conducive to learning. There is a willingness among teachers to collaborate; however, the lack of common planning time at the lower and middle school levels hinders this aspiration. Discipline does not appear to be an issue; observed student behavior was very good, overall, both in and out of the classroom. None of the statistics around school climate was of concern to the Fact Finding Team; in fact, pupil attendance is higher than the district average. Although a specific school mission does not currently exist, leaders understand the need to focus their efforts.

The faculty and staff, as evidenced by their responses and attitudes in interviews, are open to suggestions and enthusiastic about learning different methods and techniques. The principal corroborated this assessment. "People are coming to grips with the need to start with standards and base our curricula and instruction from there."

In general, there is a respectful relationship between faculty and administration. In focus groups, teachers repeatedly told team members how much they value their colleagues and how much they learn from and count on them. "We survive here because of one another," the team was told by one teacher who explained that the faculty respects and depends on one another for support and guidance. While most teachers openly support the principal, some feel they lack administrative support, especially positive reinforcement. "I only hear from the principal if I am doing something she does not like," said one teacher. It was clear to the Fact Finding Team that the faculty would appreciate more visibility from and regular contact with the principal and assistant principals with regard to instructional practices and celebration of what is going well.

## III: Organizational Structures and Management

Interviews with teachers indicated that most feel they are working in isolation. This resonated especially strongly in the elementary grades, where teachers feel they arrive in the morning, enter their classroom and often never see their colleagues except for an occasional greeting across the hallway. The causes for this, after numerous conversations with administration and faculty, appear to be lack of time for teachers to collaborate and minimal supervision of instruction. The first step the school should take to improve the process for teacher collaboration is to review the schedule and the deployment of staff to create common planning time across the grade levels. Secondly, the personnel evaluation practice must be examined so that teachers receive formative feedback on their instruction beyond the contractual evaluations which are being met. And third, a monitoring process should be developed at the school level to see whether professional development is changing classroom practice.

The high school benefits from 3 hours of common planning time every week, when students in grades 9-12 go off campus to do internships at various places in the city. This block, according to faculty interviewed, is extremely productive. Depending on the week, it involves business, subcommittees, Critical Friends Groups, presentations, workshops, grade-level or subject meetings, among other activities.

Middle and lower school teachers, on the other hand, complained that there is little or no common time for them to meet. Middle school teachers have only their individual planning time when they can choose to meet with another teacher; Kindergarten and first-grade teachers have one hour per week to meet; second-grade teachers have no time right now; grades three through five can meet during specials once or twice a week for 30 minutes. Other meetings include full staff meetings twice a year; three professional development days in August, October and March; and monthly department meetings. If the school is to decide on a common mission and set of targets to achieve it, then the first step is to create ample common planning time for teachers to work together.

It was not clear to the Fact Finding Team whether the school is making the best use of its entire support staff. In some classroom visits, members saw at least two adults present who played a very inactive role in the lesson. In a Kindergarten class, there were four adults present during the visit, yet no one seemed to have a specific task. Some teachers expressed concern of unclear roles for classroom assistants. One way to increase the flexibility of teachers' time is to assure the efficiency of their support staff. This can be accomplished only if roles are clearly defined for all personnel.

The NCLB coach, literacy tutors in the elementary grades and the literacy coaches at the middle and high school levels all have different and generally self-defined roles. These include support with data analysis, classroom visits, one-on-one meetings with teachers, and presentation of professional development workshops. With the exception of the high school coach who has carved out specific duties for herself that include modeling instruction and regular weekly conferences with colleagues, these personnel appear to wear a variety of hats. Both literacy coaches find it imperative to build trust between themselves and their peers and are consequently defining their roles based on teacher requests. While the Fact Finding Team understands that trust is a vital ingredient in this relationship, waiting for teachers to invite coaches into the classrooms may not be the best way to deploy coaching staff. Through regular classroom visitations, useful, non-evaluative feedback and the modeling of successful instructional techniques, coaches can be a huge asset to colleagues. A clear job description would clarify expectations for coaches, the administration and the faculty.

S.E.I. staff also described defining their own roles based on their professional judgment and assessment of student needs. While the program is meant to be one of immersion, they are basically supplying pull-out services. Despite the support they receive from the district, including regular contact with the Bilingual Office via e-mail and phone, a city-wide library and an upcoming curriculum, S.E.I. teachers are left to decipher their own roles and responsibilities.

The roles and responsibilities of the administrative staff are also not clear and defined, particularly in the area of supervising instruction. In an interview, one of the assistant principals commented, "I am not too sure I understand my role." Both assistant principals produced a laundry list of tasks they undertake, including student behavior management, attendance, lunch forms, and the coordination of all school activities; however, these responsibilities are dictated by need rather than a specific job description. The two leaders said that if they were able to

delegate some of these tasks to other personnel, then they could focus more on instructional leadership.

It is essential that teachers feel they have adequate guidance and support both in and out of the classroom. This fosters a mindset of striving for continual improvement and prevents stagnancy in teaching practices. While the school is completing its legal obligations for formal faculty evaluations, formative feedback does not occur on a regular basis. When Fact Finding Team members asked teachers to tell them who had been in their classes this year and what feedback they had received, most could not remember any significant feedback.

Certain district personnel, such as the Reading First and E.L.L. coordinators do periodic “walk-throughs,” and department heads occasionally go into the rooms, but this is limited. The principal said that she is more visible in the lower school where she tries to spend about five minutes in each classroom twice a week, but these visits are usually more social in nature and provide little constructive feedback. Regular classroom visits would keep leaders aware of what is happening in the classroom, enable them to assist with challenges and also acknowledge good practices. Principals in Worcester will benefit from the district’s new Principal Academy where they will spend one day being trained in classroom observation practices. Principals will also have an opportunity to problem solve with colleagues in district-sponsored professional development sessions. It is important to note that Fact Finding Team members observed several pockets of excellent instruction occurring at the school that, if recognized and shared, can serve as models for others.

In a K-12 school with nearly 900 students, it is virtually impossible for one person to carry the responsibility of doing all faculty formal and informal evaluations and observations; however, these tasks can be shared with the two assistant principals in a systematic manner. This process should entail regular follow-up visits; the continuity they bring provides participants with a clearer picture of what is occurring in classrooms, as well as the opportunity to monitor progress. In addition, the process should be driven by a clear set of standards-based expectations of good instruction. In order to be most effective, faculty and administrators should develop these expectations together, anchoring them to the learning priorities of the school.

For every program that the district is instating at A.L.L., school or district personnel were able to identify some type of professional development directly linked to that program. Examples of this include training in T.E.L.L. (Teaching English Language Learners), CMP, Everyday Math, and Reading First. While there is support at the phase of early implementation of initiatives, interviews with district and school staff confirmed that, with the exception of some grant-driven programs, there is little monitoring to see whether professional development is actually changing classroom practice. For example, the CMP program is not being thoroughly reviewed to determine whether teachers are using the materials correctly.

All teachers received 10 hours of training in T.E.L.L. According to the S.E.I. faculty, this training has served primarily to make people more aware of cultural differences and has given them very general strategies, such as giving second language learners more time, focusing on oral skills and explaining common idioms. In focus groups, teachers demonstrated their keen awareness of the cultural and academic struggles of non-English-speaking students; however,

team members saw very little evidence of instructional strategies focused on their needs. In a school where 50% of students' first language is not English, it is crucial that there be sufficient, systematic supports in place to develop English skills. The district plans to provide more professional development in this area, and the Fact Finding Team commends this initiative.

#### **IV: Leadership and Planning**

The principal repeatedly stated her desire to develop a set of essential practices that are agreed upon and followed by all staff. Before this can occur, however, the school must decide on a unified mission on which to base these essential practices. In focus groups and interviews, teachers and administrators were unable to express a common vision for the A.L.L. school. Answers were often preceded by “*my* vision is...” and included general targets, such as “improved E.L.A. scores,” and “more parent involvement.” Once stakeholders agree upon a unified vision, then they can develop specific systems and objectives that drive the school toward improvement. In this journey, the Fact Finding Team recommends that the following questions be addressed:

- To what extent are there three semi-autonomous programs within one building and to what extent is it a unified K-12 program?
- How can the school use assessment data to guide instructional practices beyond the first step of creating intervention groups?
- What initiatives are directly aligned with the school's priorities and which ones can be eliminated?

In 1992, A.L.L. was named the first in the nation Co-NECT School, an award winning design for the New American Schools Development Corporation that organizes multi-age groups with a project-based learning approach. When it was apparent that this design presented obstacles to a large number of students, the model was substantially altered and now only the high-school is known as the “Co-NECT Academy. This distinction is one of the factors contributing to the lack of unity among the three schools. Staff interviews indicate that teachers generally see the elementary, middle and high schools as three separate entities. They follow different schedules, rarely interact with one another and share few resources. When Fact Finding Team members asked the leadership team and district leaders if they see A.L.L. as three separate or one whole school, there was not a clear answer. This fundamental question must be examined as it poses practical consequences on how the school should be structured. There is no “right” answer. Rather, the right answer will be one that best serves students needs, has buy-in from staff and is practical to implement.

The school produced many documents that analyzed student achievement data. Data from assessments such as MCAS, DIBELS, Reading First, and Read 180 are being used to regroup students and to identify those needing intervention. These are important steps in using data to improve student learning. The school's use of data breaks down at the examination of the root causes for poor student achievement that are within the school's sphere of influence to change. It is within the school and district's sphere of influence to improve the fidelity of implementation of chosen programs, the efficiency and effectiveness of staff deployment and the general quality

of instruction. However, there is insufficient monitoring of initiatives and teaching to provide the school with the data it needs to fully understand the root causes of poor student achievement.

As was stated earlier in this report, over the focus groups conducted, most teachers were unable to say who had been in their classrooms to provide feedback this year. The exceptions to this are grant-driven observations, formal evaluations, district E.L.L. personnel visits and systematic class visits by the high school literacy coach. The high school literacy coach has been proactive, with the support of the principal, in configuring her schedule so that it allows her to visit and model classes, meet regularly with teachers and provide feedback. The principal has also been proactive in reorganizing the literacy block to ensure that centers are used and that Intervention groups are put in place. The school needs to gather data systematically on classroom practices to inform its improvement planning. Without a good profile of instructional practices and to what extent initiatives are being implemented with fidelity, improvement planning cannot move beyond the necessary but not sufficient stage of identifying gaps in student learning. Gaps in student learning must be linked to strengths and areas for improvement in teaching if the school is going to make well informed decisions about how to support teachers in their practice.

The principal sees the need to communicate what good instruction should look like across the school, and when she and her staff develop a set of essential practices that define good instruction, they should keep the following in mind:

- Keep it simple and concise.
- Create a few tools that combine multiple programs/initiatives.
- Define roles and responsibilities to create the time to provide instructional leadership.
- Use self-assessment by teachers, peer feedback, as well as feedback from coaches and administrators.
- Build on the Critical Friends work.

The A.L.L. school is attempting to implement many initiatives, the majority of which are generated by the district in alignment with their annual goals. However, because the school is a K-12 program, it must cope with every new initiative in the district. This is a daunting task that pulls staff attention in multiple directions. It is the Fact Finding Team's recommendation that once the school establishes a specific mission and vision, it should conduct an inventory of programs and initiatives and decide which are priorities for the school's vision. The following questions should be addressed in this process:

- Which initiatives support the specific teaching and learning goals of the school?
- Can any be eliminated?
- How will time and other resources be spread across them?
- How can district personnel support the school in prioritization?
- How will the school monitor that selected programs are being implemented with fidelity?

An important component of school success is the communication taking place with the parents and community. This was acknowledged by both school and district personnel as a top priority in their improvement efforts, and they have established numerous activities to increase family involvement. These include "Know Your School Night," "Ice Cream Sundae Social," "Family

Math Night,” a “Family-Friendly Walk-Through,” as well as a grant for Worcester Public School parents to attend GED or ESOL classes, and a school-based mental health center. Furthermore, efforts are made to send information to families in various languages; to provide interpreters when possible; and to offer activities on a flexible schedule. Nonetheless, teachers in focus groups and members of the Site Council and Co-NECT Council still view this area as one where growth is needed to increase family presence in the school.

## **Conclusion**

The A.L.L. school possesses many of the necessary conditions to improve student performance: an open, responsive staff who is willing to examine and make changes in their practices; several “pockets of excellent instruction” that can serve as models; a leadership team with a consensus-building, shared decision-making approach; and a variety of resources, programs and services. The prospects for improvement are strengthened further by the obvious commitment of district personnel to address and support the needs of the school.

The many initiatives the school has undertaken can lead to improvements in student achievement, including curricula based on state standards, staffing changes and ongoing assessments of student achievement. However, it is vital that the school develop an overarching mission that serves as the cornerstone of all operations. Once this vision is agreed upon and shared, stakeholders can review existing student achievement objectives, programs and services and determine what changes need to be made to assure they achieve that which they seek.

Insufficient monitoring of initiatives and instruction emerged as the core area for improvement. What gets monitored gets done. The lack of monitoring undermines the tremendous efforts that have been made to institute a good curriculum and sound instructional approaches because there is no data available upon which to base mid-course corrections and to foster a culture of continuous improvement based on frequent checking and small strategic adjustments. In the opinion of the Fact Finding Team, good instruction and excellent implementation of chosen programs can lead to higher student achievement at A.L.L. if attention is given to monitoring what is already in place and working incrementally to make it exemplary 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**

<b>Core Team</b>	
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)**

	<b>Core Team</b>	<b>Practitioners</b>
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)**

	<b>Core Team</b>	<b>Practitioners</b>
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**

<b>Core Team</b>	
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**

**Ledyard McFadden**, Chair, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

**Dominique Astier**, Core Team Member, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

**Stephen Gould**, Core Team Member, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

**Denise Messina**, Team Member, Supervisor for Secondary Placement, Springfield, MA

**Jim Deveney**, Team Member, Principal, McGlynn Middle School, Medford, MA

**Janet Williams**, Team Member, Deputy Superintendent, Boston, MA

**Joe Silvia**, Team Member, William S. Greene School, Fall River, MA

**Ron Fernandes**, Team Member, Assistant Principal, Wm. Monroe Trotter School, Boston, MA

**Deborah Gendreau**, Team Member, School Support Specialist, Springfield, MA

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