

## **School Panel Review Report Accelerated Learning Laboratory Worcester 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 Accelerated Learning Laboratory 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 November 16 and 17, 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 Accelerated Learning Laboratory 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.

### **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 percent 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 4 administrators, 68 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.

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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.

## **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 is linked to the small populations assessed (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 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 only available for 2004. 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.

## **PANEL RESPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS**

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

No. The Review Panel found that the school does not have a sound plan for improving student performance. Following a review of the School Improvement Plan (SIP), the Leadership Report, interviews with school administration, faculty and parents, and classroom observations, the Panel Review team concluded that the school's analysis of student performance data is too narrow in scope. The school's plan focuses on a limited number of grade levels and population subgroups instead of addressing the significant needs of all the relevant populations enrolled at the school. The definition of the Student Performance Goals also reflects the inadequate range of the school's inquiry into the reasons for poor student performance and the selection of strategies to address those causes.

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

No. The School Improvement Plan does not reflect a thorough analysis of data and program information. As a result, the gaps in student performance are not accurately defined and are incomplete. In addition, the reasons for poor student performance are not well articulated.

Interviews with administrators and faculty and a reading of the written improvement planning documents point to a lack of depth and breadth of data analysis necessary to identify gaps in student learning. The School Improvement Plan reflects consideration of data from one primary source—MCAS results. While other assessments are used for internal decisions on classroom placement and intervention services, the Panel did not hear or read of their use for identifying specific student learning gaps among the larger school population. For example, assessments used for the Reading First program (DIBELS) identify the needs of students in grades 1-3 but do not reveal anything about needs of students in other grades. The Read 180 assessment addresses only a limited number of "at risk" students. While the English language arts analysis mentions past performance on Read 180, no staff member or administrator indicated during interviews with the Panel that there is an ongoing use of these internal assessment measures to inform improvement planning. Other assessment data – including DRA, teacher-made tests, text chapter tests and other assessments, which are used in classroom placements – are vaguely referenced in the Action Steps. However, clear evidence of systematic data analysis from these additional assessment sources during development of the plan's goals and objectives is absent.

In addition to the sole use of a single source of student performance information, MCAS data describes the performance of only a small group of students at A.L.L. The school serves children in grades pre-K through 12, but MCAS results are available for grades 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 10 only and only for certain subjects at some grades. A further limitation in the data is the small number of students tested at each of the MCAS grades. The SIP is written to focus on grades 3 and 4, despite evidence from MCAS that there are low levels of proficiency in grade 10 math (31% proficient and advanced), grade 10 ELA (41% proficient and advanced), grade 8 math (17% proficient and advanced), and grade 6 math (only 9% proficient and advanced). In some cases,

these low levels of achievement represent declines from 2003 results. Panelists agree that students in grades 3 and 4 are significantly below their peers across the state; they also recognize that students in other grades are similarly challenged to meet state standards. Without compiling sufficient data to determine the areas where student learning gaps exist, the school is unable to accurately define those gaps, inquire into the reasons for their presence, and address their remediation.

From the source of data used to develop the improvement plan, the school identified several areas of student needs in ELA and math. Some are too narrow in scope by addressing a small proportion of the school's enrollment as the target population. For example, the Panel was confused by the SIP section titled, "ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS All Students – Second Language Learners." Was this section of the plan designed to address the needs of all students or to target specifically the needs of second language learners? The student performance goal that accompanies this section declares, "To increase the percentage of students in grades 3, 4, 7 and 10 whose first language is not English who score in the Low Needs Improvement category from 24% to 32% on the 2005 ELA MCAS test." The action steps that follow this student performance goal mentions "all teachers" and "teachers in grades 3-10" as the people responsible for carrying out the goal. The Panel noted the lack of consistency between the desired student outcomes and the grade level teachers responsible for taking action to promote those changes as evidence of the plan's confusing nature. Further corroborating the Panel's conclusion, teachers indicated during interviews that they did not know their specific responsibilities for raising the achievement of the targeted student groups within their classrooms.

While teachers were familiar with the plan, they were not able to identify how the plan helped them guide their instruction. The SIP lacks details to help teachers in their day-to-day instruction. By limiting their SIP to students in four grades only, the A.L.L. school does not have an effective tool for improving overall student performance. The student learning objectives refer to those students in grades 3, 4, 7 and 10 only. Since the objectives target such a small selection of students, the plan is seriously limited in serving as a description of academic needs across the larger population.

Interviews with staff, the staff survey, a review of the Leadership Report, and the SIP itself identify a consistent set of root causes for poor student performance in the elementary grades. While the root causes mentioned in the plan (student mobility and non-English language backgrounds) are clearly articulated, they are largely outside the direct control of the school. Other causes mentioned during interviews with elementary teachers, such as lack of common planning time and insufficient resources, are not addressed in the plan. This, coupled with the narrow scope of data analysis reflected in the Student Performance Goals, led the Panel to determine that the SIP lacks an accurate statement of the reasons for low achievement.

The school's analysis goes on to speak about "students who took the test did not have English as their first language," "Spanish speaking students," and "second language learners." It was difficult to discern from the terms used in the report if they were speaking about one sub-group of students only or several sub-groups. The school's demographics indicate that there are students from South and Central America, Mexico, Albania, Russia and Central Africa. Without

clarity about which students are being addressed in the plan, the A.L.L. SIP is unlikely to be clear enough to guide teachers to target the appropriate group of students.

The causes stated under each Student Performance Goal identify student learning problems as the reasons for those problems. Two examples include, “Students do not have enough time on task to develop vocabulary and spelling because they spend little time on literary tasks outside of school.” “Students do not have enough time on task to develop writing or reading skills and spend little time on literacy tasks outside of school.” “Students come from homes where English is not their first language.” These statements are a reflection of the nature of the student population at A.L.L., but do not represent reasons for the specific learning gaps that are revealed by the MCAS results. In addition, none of these reasons for poor student performance are amenable to change by the school. They are an essential part of the students the school is charged with serving. These examples indicate the school has not conducted an in-depth analysis of the causes for poor student performance. Without a clear understanding of the reasons behind poor student achievement that are within the school’s ability to change, the SIP is an ineffective tool for improvement.

In the ELA analysis, the A.L.L. School suggests that it is the disadvantaged and Hispanic students only who have negatively impacted the school’s overall performance. In contrast, the Cycle III AYP report indicates that only the limited English proficient and special education student groups have successfully attained AYP. A further contradiction for the Panel arose when reviewing the math section of the SIP. There is a goal targeting All Students – Disabled – Grades 4, 6, 8 and 10. The causes listed for the overall student performance goal in mathematics simply states, “Students do not spend enough time on drill and practice of basic numbers in class. Teachers may not have sufficient knowledge base or the curriculum is not rigorous enough for students.” In the judgment of the Panel, there is no clear evidence for any one of the three causes listed in the preceding statement. It is possible that any of the three causes (time spent on drill and practice, teacher knowledge and rigorous curriculum) are factors that influence the lack of achievement among A.L.L. students. But without evidence of a systematic, regular review of classroom practices or an assessment of the time spent on drill and practice, the school cannot support any of the three claims in the preceding sentence nor select among them for the true reason why student learning in mathematics fails to meet expectations.

In interviews with the assistant principal and the principal, both individuals confessed to a lack of understanding of the formulation of AYP and Composite Performance Index (CPI), as well as confusion about the meaning of ‘aggregate.’ A school leader’s clear understandings of these concepts are important in producing a sound plan to promote student improvement.

**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 the school’s performance goals are clear and measurable and aimed at meeting AYP, the school’s student learning objectives and the instructional change objectives are less clear.

School performance goals describe the percentage of students the school hopes to move out of the Warning into the Needs Improvement performance categories. The following Student

Performance Goal in English language arts speaks about increasing the number of students who score in the “Low Needs Improvement” category: “Student Performance Goal #1: Increase the percentage of disadvantaged students who score in the Low Needs Improvement category on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade MCAS test from 26% to 31% in 2005.” While this goal is measurable, it will not significantly increase the schools CPI in that it is measuring increased percentage of students in the Needs Improvement category rather than students scoring in the Proficient and Advanced categories, for which the school would receive a higher CPI. The minimum level of change stated in this target is insufficient to demonstrate adequate progress toward required targets for AYP.

For the students covered by the student learning objectives in the SIP, the objectives do not clearly address the learning gaps cited in the plan nor do they correspond to the reasons for poor performance identified by the school, as discussed in detail under section A. For example, in the section of the School Improvement Plan addressing the needs of Grades 3 & 4 - Hispanic Students, the Student Learning Objective says, “Students will provide evidence from the text to support their understanding (Standard #11). Students will write with a clear focus, coherent organization, and sufficient detail, (Standard #19). In the school’s analysis of root causes for under-performance, the major focus is in two areas, “Open Response Questions” and “vocabulary development and grammar usage.” There is a lack of clear connection between the school’s identified vocabulary development and grammar usage and improvement in students’ ability to provide evidence from text. The Panel agrees that vocabulary development is a fundamental need in writing, but the emphasis on vocabulary and grammar alone will not likely lead to more effective writing. It is not clear how the two aspects of the school’s plan are intended to connect. The plan itself aims at the basic skills without offering guidance to teachers that will help them better address the actual learning gap of drawing evidence from text or adding details to written responses.

The following Student Learning Objective in the mathematics section of the School Improvement Plan highlights both ambiguity and lack of measure: “From the early grades on, students develop their reasoning skills by making and testing mathematical conjectures, drawing logical conclusions, and justifying their thinking in developmentally appropriate ways. As they advance through the grades, students’ arguments become more sophisticated and they are able to construct formal proofs. By doing so, students learn mathematical reasoning skills. (Mathematics Guiding Philosophy).” In evaluating the clarity of this goal, the panelists found it difficult to determine which students will do what, when, where and to what extent. The statement of the goal is excerpted directly from the MA Curriculum Frameworks and provides a clear expression of an accepted educational philosophy, but the school has not demonstrated how it intends to take this broad philosophical statement and create an objective for which it will hold itself accountable. As written, the objective is vague and unconnected to the school’s own needs.

The Instructional Change Objectives (ICO) in the SIP detail how changes in curriculum and instruction will lead to improved student achievement. Instructional Change Objective #1 in the English language arts section under the Student Performance Goal to increase the percentage of disadvantaged students who score in the Low Needs Improvement category on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade MCAS test says, “Teachers will continue to provide students with intensive computer-managed instruction in vocabulary and reading comprehension, continue multi-sensory language

instruction daily, and utilize Houghton Mifflin intervention programs.” The use of the phrase “will continue to” in the Instructional Change Objective indicates that there is no expectation that teacher practice will vary from existing practice. Therefore, there is little likelihood that student performance will change if teacher performance remains the same.

A major weakness of the A.L.L. Improvement Plan is the limited range of students covered by the objectives in the document. No specific goals exist for students in pre-kindergarten through grade 2, grades 5, 7, 9, 11 or 12. The plan for the entire school sets objectives for four grades only (3, 4, 7 and 10) – a fraction of the students in the school. According to enrollment figures, these grades represent 239 students (or 29 percent of the school) out of a total of 827 PK–12 students. While the Executive Summary indicates all teachers are expected to implement the plan’s strategies, teacher interviews during the panel review indicate a different understanding among the staff. Staff comments to the Panel indicate their belief that the plan addresses grades 3 and 4 only.

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

No. The successful implementation of the strategies listed as action steps in the A.L.L. Improvement Plan are not directly targeted to the identified weaknesses in student performance. As a result, the actions are not likely to have the desired positive effect. Because the plan does not adequately define the student outcomes expected for each improvement objective, the incremental progress expected, and systems for collecting, compiling, and analyzing outcome benchmarks for all students across the grades, the plan will have a minimal impact on overall achievement at the school.

The action steps in the plan do not lay out a clear plan for overcoming gaps in student performance. Action Step #3 in the Mathematics section says, “Teachers will post-test students two times a year to determine improvement in student skill level and to identify at-risk students for small group instruction.” In the judgment of the Panel, biannual benchmarks for students are insufficient to readjust instruction and understand both student gains and losses. The team believed that to use the post-test to identify at-risk students only was also a missed opportunity to inform professional behavior around instruction.

Root causes (such as student mobility) identified in the School Improvement Plan are not within the school’s direct control. The SIP does not identify root causes related to school-based activities, so it was unclear to the Panel how changes in instruction address the identified root causes. For this reason, the link between root causes and strategies selected for improvement is not direct. It is not likely that the strategies in place or planned for adoption will lead to changes in student achievement since the reasons for poor performance have not been accurately identified. A focus on external factors, while representing important elements of students’ lives, contradicts the plan’s focus on classroom activities to improve student learning.

Few specific strategies are articulated in programs or the SIP, so it is difficult to determine whether the plan will produce intended results. As previously mentioned, the Student Performance Objectives address a few grade levels only. Benchmarks and incremental steps are

included for a narrow range of grades only, or lack clarity about grade levels to which they pertain. As an example, in mathematics the language is vague. “Teachers will compare the results of the September pre-test on short answer questions to that of post-testing in January and May to determine if there has been a 13% increase in the number of students scoring a “1” in each testing, to result in a 26% increase by May of 2005.” It was unclear to the Panel whether all students – or 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders only – were taking a post-test, or who was expected to achieve the 13% increase. Furthermore, there is insufficient information to judge whether the pre- and post-tests are reliable measures of the important skills students need to address.

Some benchmarks intended to measure changes in the quality of the education students receive focus on narrow student populations, making it difficult to gauge school-wide impact. For example, special education students only in grades 4, 6, 8, and 10 will be assessed as a measure of the single math performance goal. A plan that does not address the broad range of students served by the school will not be likely to lead to higher achievement.

The Action Plan lacks specificity regarding pre- and post-tests and performance goals on these assessments. For example, on the single Student Performance Goal related to math, one Action Step is, “Teachers will post-test students twice a year to determine increase in student skills...”. The plan does not break out content to be measured at specific grade levels, although the Student Learning Objective encompasses six different grades, from elementary through high school. It lists four assessment measures for this Action Step, “STAR Math, Everyday Math, Planning time, TAAP,” but does not quantify any indicators of mastery.

The Panel determined that the plan does not adequately address concerns raised in group and individual interviews related to teaching and learning. Teachers who described the loss of common planning time noted that they had previously used this opportunity to look at student work and plan interdisciplinary projects. Interviews also revealed that teachers create their own curriculum for English language arts, despite claims by the principal that district-wide curriculum documents are available. The Leadership Report addresses both the lack of time and the need for a consistent, developmentally appropriate curriculum, but these deficiencies are not adequately addressed in the SIP. For example, of the 10 action steps listed for one English performance goal, only one proposes adding more instructional time for ELA during the school day.

The timelines for benchmarks that exist – for example “twice a year” – do not provide frequent interim checkpoints to modify instruction where needed. The Panel concluded that these benchmarks, therefore, do not provide adequate data about incremental improvement.

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

No. The Panel reviewed various documents (including the SIP and Leadership Report) to assess their utility in guiding the improvement initiatives. In the view of the Panel Review team, the A.L.L. School Improvement Plan does not meet the guidelines established by the Department of Education for level of specificity in setting Student Performance Objectives. The plan’s greatest weakness is in identifying a small subset of the full populations in the student performance

objectives. In an effort to focus on root causes identified in the plan, the school has listed narrow performance goals that do not address the full range of the school's students.

The Accelerated Learning Lab SIP follows a template provided by the district. Benchmarks identified for Student Learning Objectives in the SIP list specific internal assessments such as Teacher Assistant Assessment Program (TAAP) and STAR Math. The plan identifies groups of students to be assessed to determine progress against the student learning benchmarks, yet these groups of students are too narrowly defined to provide a meaningful measure of school-wide academic progress. For example, in the math student performance goal, the benchmark identifies special education students only in grades 4, 6, 8, and 10 as students to be assessed. This group comprises only 57 students out of the total school population of 827.

Some of the action steps lack sufficient detail to allow measurable results, or the measures may not actually guide implementation of the improvement initiative. For example, one instructional change objective is, "Teachers will provide students with focused instruction in vocabulary development and the structure of English language and Standard English conventions." The measure of implementation for this Action Step is, "Purchase orders [of leveled readers] completed and submitted to the administration." The completion of purchase orders is not a quality indicator of whether teachers are, in fact, offering "focused instruction in vocabulary development." There are similar vague or inconsistent connections between outcome goals and action steps throughout the plan. The instructional change objective states, "Teachers will model and provide students with opportunities to practice answering short answer questions from all of the four framework standards." One of the action steps says, "Teachers will post-test their students twice a year with the measure of implementation being that the results would be sent to the administration." The Panel could not conclude that merely testing students is an action step that would lead to change in instruction nor in student improvement.

The English language arts analysis on page 11 of the SIP indicates that the school will address their "aggregate group of students as second language learners." Although a significant number of students in the school are indeed second language learners, this statement – which drives an important segment of the SIP – is not explained adequately or clearly. It was unclear to the Panel how these two different populations – Hispanic students and second language learners – were different or the same. It was difficult to discern from the terms used in the report if they were speaking about one sub-group of students only, or several. The demographics imply that there are students from South and Central America, Mexico, Albania, Russia and Central Africa enrolled at A.L.L. Without more precise information about the number of students who are truly Limited English Proficient (LEP) as identified by reliable language assessments, and without clearly defining which gains are expected for both Hispanic and LEP students separately and combined with all other students, the school's plan is inadequate to track short-term and long-term gains and to adjust the plan's strategies in response to student changes.

The Panel Review team also found that some language used in writing student performance goals is unclear. One ELA goal addresses the needs of Hispanic students in grades 3 and 4. Another goal identifies a group of students in grades 3, 4, 7 and 10 "whose first language is not English." This overlap in subgroups in the written plan is confusing. However, interviews revealed this

group includes second language speakers who are not Hispanic, such as Albanian, Cambodian and African students.

In the view of the Panel, the narrowness of the goals and the lack of specificity in the action steps and plans for monitoring implementation hinder the plan's utility as an effective tool for communicating the decisions that the school has made and the initiatives the school will undertake.

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

No. It does not appear that previous improvement plans and their effectiveness were considered in developing the current plan. In addition, the plan does not reflect the work of collaborators who participated in the PIM process.

Based on the report issued by the Review Panel that visited the school in 2001, the previous SIP focused on the needs of the middle school grades. The current plan focuses mainly on four grades and does not provide any reference to the earlier plan or any ongoing monitoring of goals the previous plan had identified. Interviews with school administrators indicate that an earlier version of the 2004-2005 A.L.L. SIP included broader goals and more wide-ranging objectives, but was simplified significantly to its current form. References to the 'successes' of previous strategies are contradicted by the 2004 MCAS results that indicate significant weaknesses in student achievement, including declines in a number of grade levels and subject areas from earlier MCAS performance. From this evidence, the Panel concluded that the effectiveness of previous plans was not a major consideration in development of the current plan.

Interviews with administrators and staff indicated that the current plan is not a direct outcome of the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) process. The PIM process is intended to reflect the work of a team. Eight individuals are identified in the SIP as members of the Implementation Team. However, interviews indicate that the collaborative product was heavily revised by only one member of the team—the school leader at the time—to focus on specific areas targeted for improvement.

The revised SIP addresses only grade levels with MCAS scores, namely grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10. Not all students are tested in both ELA and math in each of these grades. Yet the school contains students at pre-kindergarten through grade 12 scoring across full range of proficiency levels. The current plan addresses disaggregated student groups (Hispanic, Second Language Learners, Disadvantaged and Disabled), but not the aggregate population. According to multiple interviews, the team that created the full broad-ranging document from which these current SIP goals were extracted did not include SPED or ELL staff. Since two of the three major objectives focus on disabled students and English Language Learners, this omission is significant. Further confusing an understanding of the reasons for the school's decisions on goals and strategies is the state AYP calculation, which shows that the ONLY student groups attaining AYP for Cycle III at A. L. L. were Special Education and Limited English Proficient. It is unclear why the school decided these two groups would be the target of its improvement efforts when other

subgroups and the aggregate population were more significantly below performance and improvement goals.

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

No. The Review Panel's analysis of factors addressing Key Question 2 led to a mixed response to the subsidiary questions. Leadership and management within the school indicate important gaps in skills for conducting data analysis and weaknesses in curriculum, although the Panel also noted some areas of strength, such as school climate. There is good evidence of faculty support for the planned improvement effort, although the SIP that was prepared to drive that effort is flawed. District guidance and support are inadequate at this time. The critical areas of weaknesses led the Panel to conclude that conditions are not currently in place to secure the successful implementation of the plan.

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

No. The Panel determined that some important elements of school leadership and management are lacking, specifically in the areas of data analysis and a coherent curriculum. The Panel did note positive elements, particularly school climate. Given time, the weaknesses may be addressed by the new school principal and other school leaders.

At A.L.L., school leadership includes the principal, an administrative team of three other assistant principals, and an instructional leadership team of 11 that includes the administrators, department heads and other program specialists. The A.L.L. school appears to have effective internal leadership and sound management in many areas. In general, the school can be characterized as a safe, caring school climate. The physical setting is clean, bright and spacious. Students observed in the hallways were orderly during transitions. Average class size ranged from 3 to 20 students in classes that were observed. Within classrooms, students were on task, interacting appropriately with staff and classmates. Exchanges between students, teachers and administrators were positive, supportive and respectful.

Because the principal had been in place for just two months at the time of the Panel Review, it was not possible to determine her ability to lead staff to improve student performance. The school survey indicates 78 percent of the staff strongly agree or agree that the school principal provides effective school leadership. One comment in the survey read, "She is a very hands-on principal who is very available to the parents and students." While the staff reported widespread agreement or support of the principal's leadership, they also (in other responses) indicated uncertainty as to whether the principal's leadership will lead to improved student performance.

The new principal communicates effectively – both orally and in writing. The Leadership Report is clearly written and addresses weaknesses that are corroborated through staff interviews. Absent from the written document prepared by the previous principal are key concerns about the lack of common planning time and a coherent curriculum identified by both the new principal and many staff members. The principal reported during interviews that she is currently

establishing systems to provide both vertical and horizontal teaming – for example, all teachers of math pK-12 will meet to plan. Further, she recognizes the need to have some sort of comprehensive school improvement plan or system in place to establish a coherent pK-12 structure. In this respect, the panelists concluded that the Leadership Report provided a better understanding of critical needs than does the written plan. Although the current principal has been in place for a short time, she is investing the staff in using the SIP to drive instruction. This buy-in is a useful step, although the current SIP is too narrow in its focus and lacking in detail to achieve needed results.

A.L.L. school staff generally express confidence in the school leaders. Staff report that the principal is visible and accessible; she elicits feedback. “Students know who she is,” said one person. Interviews supported the staff survey measure of the principal’s ability to provide “effective leadership and guidance to improve academic performance,” giving her an average rating of 3.98 on a scale of 5.

School leaders appear to involve a broad range of stakeholders in decision-making. The principal spoke of shared management with her administrative team. Staff agree that they are “well informed about initiatives undertaken by school leadership and staff to improve students’ performance,” rating this measure an average of 4 on a scale of 5.

The capacity of school leaders to bring about positive change has some important gaps. One notable weakness in school leadership is in the use of data to inform instruction. The math department head and central office produce data documents for instructional staff, but there is no clear suggestion that staff understand how to analyze data or implement data-driven decisions.

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

Yes. In general, the staff is supportive of planned improvement efforts, although the Review Panel identified some impediments to their implementation.

The staff survey and interviews indicate that teachers are very familiar with the school improvement plan. The statement, “Our school has a well-defined plan for reaching student performance goals,” received the highest average of any measure on the staff survey, scoring 4.31 out of 5. A.L.L. faculty members engage in discussions about the school’s improvement initiatives at regular meetings. The SIP is referenced on the redesigned lesson plan format, with a section for teachers to indicate SIP strategies addressed by the lessons.

Still, staff members do not uniformly express a belief that improvement planning will measurably boost student achievement. Interviews repeatedly referenced student language deficits and mobility as lingering obstacles to improved performance.

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

No. Although the district was involved in the development of the SIP, the weaknesses in the resulting document reveal that the district has failed to provide adequate guidance to A.L.L. about its improvement planning efforts. This is very significant, considering the fact that overall

student performance continues to be very low and that there is a new principal in the school who could benefit from consistent and appropriate district support as she guides the school's improvement initiatives.

The Leadership Report and interviews with the district leader, school administrators and teachers indicate that district personnel were involved in the initial development of the SIP. The district provided the template for developing the plan. Quadrant managers, the superintendent and the school committee reviewed the School Improvement Plan. Panel Review team members observed, however, that key district leaders are not familiar with the A.L.L. SIP. One flipped through the document as if he had not seen it before, while insisting on the usefulness and clarity of the document, saying, "It's as clear as you can get." It is the Panel's consensus, however, that the plan is significantly weak in multiple specific areas. District leaders also noted that the plan's development followed the PIM process precisely. This statement was not supported by the contents of the document and the quality of the plan's components, particularly the causal analysis. As indicated previously, the SIP lists causes that are outside its control.

Interviews with the superintendent and school administrators did not reassure the Panel Review team that conditions are in place for successful implementation of the plan. It appears from the quality of the product that district-level oversight of the plan's development was not sufficient. District leaders seemed out of touch with some pressing needs that impact program and resulting student performance at A.L.L. District leaders claimed that the A.L.L. plan addresses all grades, which, in the Panel's judgment, the document does not do sufficiently. Additionally, the superintendent offered causes for poor student performance that mirrored the school's list of causes, naming limited English proficiency, poverty and challenging home environments as reasons for low achievement. These factors have an impact on student learning but are beyond the school or district's control and are not amenable to change from district or school initiatives. Until the district insists that the school focus on areas under its control, the guidance it offers will be uncertain to have a direct positive impact on student achievement.

The Panel Review team raised questions about whether district leaders are well-informed of the needs of the school. For example, parent interviews echoed staff concerns about the loss of the extended day program because of budget cuts. In contrast, the district leader suggested that the community did not support extended day programs, citing competing needs for students' time. In addition, the district leaders referenced an English language arts scope and sequence in place across the district. However, teachers mentioned that their books served as the curriculum and the review Panel saw no evidence of curriculum guides within the school, a contradiction the Panel was unable to resolve but which indicates a significant disparity between district and school views of A.L.L.'s needs. The selection two years ago of a district-wide math program for elementary grades addresses the difficulties of students who change schools frequently within the district, but in ELA, neither a similar selection of district-wide curriculum materials, a curriculum guide, nor a scope and sequence is apparent according to interviews with teachers and observations in classrooms. If, as teachers and school leaders suggest, student mobility is a contributing factor to poor student performance at A.L.L., district failure to coordinate curriculum across the district will have an impact on student achievement.

From its interviews with district personnel and school staff, the Panel concluded that district support is inadequate to provide confidence that the A. L. L. will achieve improved student results. The poor quality of some critical components of the A. L. L. SIP indicates that district guidance and oversight of the planning process are lacking. Contradictions between district claims regarding the curriculum and teacher responses to panelists' questions contribute to the Panel's judgment that the district is unfamiliar with the needs of the school.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the judgment of the Review Panel, Accelerated Learning Lab's School Improvement Plan has significant weaknesses. Data analysis is superficial and does not accurately identify student learning needs or declare likely reasons for those learning gaps. The student performance goals do not address the entire population or measure growth in all grades served by the school. Student learning objectives and instructional changes proposed in the plan are focused on teaching procedures and only indirectly linked to the content or method of instruction in specific skills and knowledge and are not likely to lead to improved student results.

The current principal had been in place for only two months at the time of the Panel Review. She is well regarded by staff, and the Leadership Report indicates an understanding of needs that were not addressed in the plan but that play an important role at the school. Limited skill in data analysis weakens the ability of school leaders to make decisions precisely targeted to needed changes.

District leaders provide insufficient curriculum guidance and resource allocation to provide for the extensive needs of A.L.L. students. Guidance in the development of the school improvement plan was inadequate, resulting in a plan that addresses only a few student groups at the school. District leaders described school needs that are different from those identified by parents and school leaders.

In the judgment of the Panel Review team, the Accelerated Learning Lab does not have an effective plan for improving student performance and, based on the current conditions, lacks the capacity to implement needed changes in school programs and practices.

**APPENDIX A  
Team Members**

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**Myka-Lynne Sokoloff, Co-Chair**, SchoolWorks Consultant, Beverly, MA 01915

**Erin Furey, DOE Coordinator**, Massachusetts Department of Education, Malden, MA 02148

**David Copice, Panel Member**, Coordinator of Data Analysis and MCAS, Ashland High School, Ashland, MA 01721

**Melissa Earls, Panel Member**, Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, North Brookfield, MA 01535

**Kate Fenton, Panel Member**, Director of Professional Development, Springfield Public Schools, Springfield, MA 01105

**Mary Fischer, Panel Member**, Director of Reading/Language Arts, Arlington Public School, Arlington, MA 02476

**Dr. Denise Messina, Panel Member**, Supervisor for Secondary Placement, Springfield Public Schools, Springfield, MA 01105

**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