

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

### **Worcester East Middle School Worcester Public Schools**

#### **Executive Summary**

A Fact Finding (FF) Team assembled by the Massachusetts Department of Education spent three days at Worcester East Middle School (February 15-17, 2005) reviewing documents and conducting classroom observations and interviews with school-wide and district personnel. The task of the FF Team was to determine the reasons for low levels of student achievement at Worcester East Middle School (WEMS) and to analyze the prospects for improvement based on the school's existing strengths across four domains: Curriculum and Instruction, School Climate, Organizational Structure and Management, and Leadership and Planning.

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

Following 65 classroom observations, numerous interviews and an in-depth review of school-wide documents, the FF team identified two key issues that have likely been influential in the low student achievement rates at WEMS in the domain of curriculum and instruction.

- Instructional practices that were limited in quality and were not designed to meet individual student learning needs
- A generally insufficient understanding among teachers of the existing curriculum and how to use guiding documents to plan instruction

It is the judgment of the FF Team that these instructional and curricular weaknesses and inconsistencies exist at WEMS as a result of:

- The lack of a coordinated and meaningful school-wide data system to assess and analyze student learning needs and, in turn, guide instructional practice and curriculum implementation
- Inadequate instructional oversight to monitor curriculum implementation and provide ongoing feedback on classroom practices and teaching strategies

In order to develop a School Improvement Plan that is likely to increase student performance, the FF Team recommends the following priority action for WEMS:

- Establish a school-wide, coordinated data system that can be used to identify student learning gaps and plan instructional strategies/classroom practices accordingly

As improvement planning begins, WEMS can build upon the following strengths to assist the school's efforts in addressing the current instructional and curricular inadequacies:

- The growing awareness among leadership, faculty and staff that data plays an important role in education
- The implementation of the pilot phase of the district's assessment initiative - Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)

## II School Climate

WEMS lacks a shared expectation for high student achievement and a limited understanding as to how the school can uniformly implement standards for teaching and learning that can positively impact student performance rates. This is evidenced by:

- A belief that external factors, as opposed to instruction and related educational practices, dictate student learning capabilities
- The limited use of a standardized, school-wide curriculum to establish high expectations for teaching and learning and appropriate instructional rigor and pace that are based on student achievement outcomes

The FF Team identified two factors at WEMS that support the likelihood that the school has the capacity to successfully establish a unified school climate that focuses on increased academic achievement:

- The faculty and staff at WEMS are hard-working and committed to school improvement efforts.
- WEMS has had success with the school-wide implementation of a disciplinary system (PBIS “STAR”) that has resulted in a significant decrease in behavioral disruptions this school year.

In order to achieve a school climate that reflects a shared vision rooted in high expectations for student performance, the FF Team recommends the following as WEMS begins its improvement planning process:

- Establish a school-wide theme focused on high student achievement that recognizes the school’s diverse learners.
- Utilize the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) and School Improvement Plan (SIP) development processes to provide a unified expectation for student achievement and school programs.

## III Organizational Structure and Management

The school day at Worcester East Middle School follows accepted practices for middle schools. While the foundations, which include interdisciplinary instructional teams, common planning time several times per week and instructional leadership personnel to support teaching are in place, they are not being used effectively.

- WEMS has not fully implemented the middle school model.
- Leadership does not effectively monitor instruction or related planning to support the necessary improvement initiatives.

As evidence, the FF Team identified the following conditions:

- Common planning time lacks a structure and agenda to fully focus efforts on increasing student achievement and on effective use of instructional teams.
- Oversight and planning responsibilities associated with instructional leadership positions are not clearly defined. As a result, staff members receive minimal feedback on teaching practices and are not held accountable for the proper and quality implementation of curriculum and instruction.

As Worcester East Middle School begins to focus efforts on improvement planning, the FF Team identified several areas of priority:

- Provide personnel to supervise the complete implementation of the middle school model based on the work of Turning Points.
- Clearly define the structure of leadership roles and associated responsibilities to ensure a school-wide understanding of roles and responsibilities so that staff know where to seek appropriate support when needed.
- Encourage opportunities for participation in leadership positions to diversify and increase the number of staff members involved.
- Implement a system of instructional oversight and frequent feedback that holds personnel in leadership positions accountable for monitoring the quality implementation of curriculum, instruction and planning at the classroom level.

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

The following domain focuses solely on leadership and guidance at the district level that is needed to support WEMS in their future improvement planning efforts. The FF Team identified the following deficiencies in district guidance that have affected the limited implementation of improvement initiatives at the school level:

- Limited program evaluation to determine whether implementation of programs and trainings have had the desired effect on instructional practices and student achievement
- Insufficient district presence to support instructional leadership at the school level, resulting in unclear responsibilities for designated positions and limited oversight of instruction at the classroom level
- A district-wide system for assessing and analyzing student achievement data at the middle school level is not evident. As a result, WEMS does not possess a meaningful system of data analysis to effectively guide improvement planning efforts.
- Inadequate training and support in the development of the School Improvement Plan (SIP) from the district. As a result, WEMS does not currently have the capacity to effectively develop a sound SIP on their own.

In order to effectively support WEMS in their improvement planning efforts, the FF Team recommends the following priority actions at the district level:

- Employ an internal system for evaluating the effectiveness of district level initiatives to ensure that implementation is providing the desired outcome.
- Create, implement and provide training on a standardized data system that can be used by the school throughout the year, to assess student skill levels, re-assess student gains and continued weaknesses and to plan instruction accordingly.
- Develop a systematic method for supporting instructional leadership at WEMS that provides continuous feedback.
- Assist the school in building its capacity to implement ongoing, school-wide improvement planning that is based on state regulations and is meaningful to the WEMS community.

As improvement planning begins, the district and the school can utilize the following strengths to address the existing areas of deficit:

- The pilot phase of the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment is underway.
- District personnel who have instructional oversight responsibilities at the school level exist.
- WEMS will participate in the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) process with additional monitoring from the Department of Education to support the district and school in the development of a new school improvement plan.

The above findings and recommendations are a complete summary of the Fact Finding Team's work. The third section of this report, which begins on page 8, repeats all of these findings and recommendations in greater detail. It may be redundant for some audiences to read both sections.

## 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.

## **Worcester East Middle School Profile**

### **Enrollment**

The Worcester East Middle School (WEMS) is one of four middle schools in Worcester. The school serves students in grades 7 - 8. Over the last four years, enrollment at WEMS has ranged from a low of 778 in 2001 to a high of 850 in 2002. In October, 2004 there were 747 students enrolled at the school. Student demographics at WEMS have remained fairly stable over the same time, with several notable changes.

Between 2001 and 2004, the proportion of Black students attending Worcester East Middle has increased slightly – from 10 percent in 2001 to 14 percent in 2004 – while the percentage of White students has decreased from 47 to 43 percent over the same time. This year, 35 percent of students are reported as being in the Hispanic subgroup, slightly higher than the 31-32 percent reported in earlier years. In 2004, 78 percent of WEMS' students were from low-income families. This proportion is the highest of the previous three years, with a low of 59 percent being reported in 2003. In 2004, 7 percent of students are reported as being Limited English Proficient, similar to the proportions reported in the previous two years. This school year, 21 percent of students are receiving special education services, the same percentage as in 2003.

In 2004, WEMS registered an attendance rate of 92.1 percent, with students absent 12.8 days on average. The school's retention rate was 3.7 percent in 2003, the last year for which this data is available. Out-of-school suspensions were reported at 34.6 percent, more than five times the State's 6.1 average. The rate of 2003 in-school suspensions was reported at 23.6 percent, and the school's exclusion rate of 14.1 percent was seven times the State's 2.0 percent average.

### **Staffing**

The 2004-2005 Worcester East Middle School's staffing report indicates that the school is composed of 4 administrators, 64 teachers and 4 guidance staff members. Approximately half the educators at the school have been there for three or fewer years. Just over 72 percent of teachers are licensed in their current teaching area.

## **MCAS Overview**

Students at the Worcester East Middle School are assessed in English language arts (ELA) in grade 7 and in mathematics in grade 8. The school has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in the aggregate in ELA three times since 1999. The school has not made AYP in mathematics in the aggregate or student subgroups since 2000. 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 six reported subgroups: Special Education, African American/Black, and White.<sup>1</sup> In mathematics, the school failed to make AYP in the aggregate and for five of the six reported subgroups: Special Education, Free/Reduced Price Lunch, African American/Black, Hispanic, and White. The school is currently identified for Improvement in ELA and Corrective Action in mathematics.

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

### **GRADE 7**

#### **Regular Education**

Results for regular education students in grade 7 ELA show improvement between 2001 and 2004, with the largest gains shown in 2004. In 2001, 2 percent of students scored in the Advanced range, 30 percent in the Proficient range, 48 percent in the Needs Improvement range and 20 percent in Warning. In 2003, 37 percent were Proficient, 51 percent were in Needs Improvement and 12 percent in Warning. In 2004, the percentage of students in Warning increased slightly to 15, while the percentage of Proficient students increased to 44. Two percent of students scored in the Advanced range in 2004.

#### **Special Education**

Results for Special Education students in grade 7 ELA have been somewhat variable. The highest performance is evident in 2003 and 2004. In 2003, 1 percent of students were Proficient, 50 percent scored in the Needs Improvement range and 49 percent in Warning. In 2004, 5 percent were Proficient, 44 percent scored in Needs Improvement and 51 percent in Warning.

#### **Limited English Proficient**

The performance of LEP students has improved from 2002 through 2004. In 2004, 12 percent of the LEP students assessed scored in the Proficient range, 60 percent were in Needs Improvement and 29 percent were in Warning. In 2002, 100 percent of students scored in the Warning category.

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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 Worcester East Middle School in 2004 were Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Free/Reduced Price Lunch, African American/Black, Hispanic, and White for both ELA and mathematics.

## **Student Performance in Mathematics**

### **GRADE 8**

#### **Regular Education**

Scores for regular education students in grade 8 mathematics have remained fairly stable between 2002 and 2004. In 2001, 48 percent of students scored in the Warning range. Since that time, 54-57 percent have scored in Warning. In 2004, the percentage of students scoring in the Advanced category was 4, compared to 2 percent in 2003. In both 2003 and 2004, the percentage of students in the Proficient range was 13, while the percentage of students in Needs Improvement was 28-29.

#### **Special Education**

Performance for Special Education students in grade 8 mathematics is consistently low between 2001 and 2004. In 2002, 15 percent scored in Needs Improvement and 85 percent were in Warning. In 2004, the percentage of students in Warning increased to 93, with 6 percent in Needs Improvement and 1 percent Proficient.

#### **Limited English Proficient**

Results for LEP students in grade 8 mathematics are available for 2003 and 2004 only. In 2003, 76 percent scored in the Warning category, 19 percent in Needs Improvement and 5 percent in Proficient. In 2004, the percent in Warning had increased to 90; the percentage of students in Needs Improvement was 7 and 3 percent were Proficient.

### **Key Domains of Inquiry**

Please note, this section augments the findings and recommendation presented in the executive summary with additional evidence and discussion.

## **I: Curriculum and Instruction**

The Panel Review of Worcester East Middle School's improvement initiatives, conducted in November 2004, concluded that the WEMS School Improvement Plan (SIP) did not contain an adequate analysis of data to identify root causes of student learning gaps or examine instructional strategies that were sufficient to guide necessary improvement efforts at the school. During the in-depth Fact Finding visit, which is the topic of this report, the limited use of data to assess and analyze student learning needs was also evident. The FF Team identified two key issues as overarching characteristics of WEMS classrooms that have likely been influential in the low student achievement rates: 1) Instructional practices were limited in quality and were not designed to meet individual student learning needs; and, 2) A varied understanding among teachers of the existing curriculum and how to use guiding documents to plan instruction.

During the three-day visit to Worcester East Middle School, the FF Team observed 65 classroom lessons, spanning all academic subjects and grade levels. Observations included the school's special education and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. In a few instances, a classroom was observed more than once. Based on the Department of Education (DOE)

observation rubric, the team rated various elements of classroom instruction and practice on a scale ranging from one (*does not meet an acceptable standard*) to three (*exemplifies good practice*) with a score of two suggesting the instructional element of interest *meets an acceptable standard*. The results are summarized in the following table in both number and (percentages).

Elements of Classroom practice	Does not meet an acceptable standard (1)	Meets an acceptable standard (2)	Exemplifies good practice (3)
Clear lesson objectives	34/65 (52%)	16/65 (25%)	15/65 (23%)
Ongoing assessment of student learning	40/65 (62%)	20/65 (30%)	5/65 (8%)
Differentiated Instructional Strategies	45/65 (69%)	15/65 (23%)	5/65 (8%)

Of the classrooms observed, approximately one-half to two-thirds possessed instructional practices that were judged by the FF Team to be of an *unacceptable standard*. These classroom lessons (52%) failed to state clear objectives or simply indicated the lesson's purpose as participation in an activity - "today we will complete questions one through four." In both cases, lesson objectives neglected to identify the desired learning outcome for students.

Classroom observations indicated that ongoing assessment of student learning was simply not occurring in 62% of the lessons observed. Instructional staff did not check for student understanding or give feedback to guide student work. Instruction was characterized primarily (69% of observations) by teacher-directed, whole-group presentation and/or students completing worksheets for the duration of the lesson. Though observers noted that in some classrooms students were divided into groups to complete work, interviews with instructional staff suggested some students had a reduced workload, "We give them (students) fewer problems," for example. There was no evidence to suggest that division of student groups was based on achievement levels or that reduced requirements are accommodations. These practices are not considered differentiated instructional strategies.

The FF Team also observed *exemplary* or *acceptable* instructional practices in approximately one-half to one-third of the classrooms observed. These lessons were characterized by clear and explicit lesson objectives that enabled students to understand the purpose of the day's lesson. Ongoing assessment for student learning occurred in the form of probing questions – "Why do you think that will happen?" – "Can someone else give me another reason" – which elicited thoughtful student responses consistent with the lesson's intent and enabled the instructor to clarify misunderstanding based on incorrect student responses. Some elements of differentiated instructional practices occurred in these classrooms to address the diverse learning needs of the student population, which included: modeling, use of visuals and manipulatives, a shift in teaching methodology (i.e., from whole group to small group instruction) and varying explanations and presentations of content. As WEMS begins its improvement planning process, it is noteworthy that examples of positive classroom instruction exist at the school that can be used as models.

Based on interviews and classroom observations, teachers did not exhibit a clear understanding of the existing curriculum and how to use it to plan instruction. The FF Team conducted interviews and focus groups with nearly all members of the school's instructional staff. In response to the question, "What is the curriculum you are following?" the Team received varied responses naming text books, syllabus outlines, district benchmarks, curriculum maps all as potential guidance documents. While they are sources of guidance, no clear, common process for using them was evident. Use of a school-wide curriculum was not evident. Classroom observations suggested little overlap was seen in the content being taught, within or across grade levels. In one classroom, for example, a learning objective was listed that referenced the district benchmarks; however, instruction was conducted on a completely different subject. Though district personnel articulated that clear curriculum guides and benchmarks existed across content areas, this was not evident at the school level. The lack of a consistent process to use existing guidance documents to plan instruction has likely influenced the low student performance rates at Worcester East Middle School.

There is limited instructional leadership at WEMS. WEMS does not currently have a clearly defined system of instructional oversight and, as a result, the school has been unable to identify poor teaching practices and recognize exemplary instruction. This will be further addressed in later in this report (See Domains III and IV).

The lack of a coordinated and meaningful school-wide data system has also affected the ability of staff to plan and implement sound teaching methodologies to specifically address the diverse learning needs of the school's student body. In order to increase student achievement, student learning gaps must be identified at the skill level. The SIP identifies "desired level(s) of (student) improvement" to be measured in gains from pre- to post-test. However, it was not clear to the FF Team what school-wide assessments were being used, how these measures were analyzed to report student learning needs, or whether they were being conducted. In one focus group, a teacher suggested, "we don't have any information about what students know (skills) until November." The SIP, however, sets forth a September pre-test administration (SIP, p. 20). Reports from other instructional staff indicated they determine student learning needs based on informal observations, responses in class and some end-of-unit assessments. WEMS does not have a consistent, school-wide assessment system that enables staff and instructional leadership to identify student learning needs at their root cause. This is a critical deficiency in the educational program at Worcester East Middle School.

As Worcester East Middle School begins its improvement planning efforts, the FF Team recommends the following priority action to begin to address the weaknesses in curriculum and instruction and instill a school-wide focus on the importance of assessment in teaching and learning:

- *Establish a school-wide, coordinated data system that can be used to identify student learning gaps and plan instructional strategies/classroom practices accordingly.* The absence of an assessment system has been well established in this Domain. The limited use of student achievement data has impacted the quality of instruction at the school as staff members are unsure of what to teach. The district reports the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) - an assessment that measures student skill levels and is intended to be administered

several times a year - is in its pilot phase of implementation in Worcester. Assuming that this assessment system is employed at WEMS and that leadership and staff members are properly trained in how to use the MAP, this is a strong foundation that the school can build upon. In addition, a growing awareness exists among leadership, faculty and staff that data plays a critical role in teaching and learning and that understanding student skill deficits at their root would assist planning classroom instruction.

The FF Team identified inadequacies in the quality of instructional practices and inconsistencies in curriculum implementation as factors affecting low student achievement levels at WEMS. However, the lack of data analysis to determine student learning needs at their root and, therefore, guide classroom instruction is at the center of the problem. Systematic and ongoing use of data at the classroom level is likely to have a significant impact on classroom practices. Because of its importance in determining student achievement levels and, therefore, enabling staff to plan instruction accordingly, the implementation of a school-wide, coordinated data system must receive priority attention. Though curriculum implementation and instructional strategies also require further attention and oversight, priority actions for these elements will be addressed in later in this report.

## **II: School Climate**

It is important to note upfront that the FF Team found the faculty and staff at WEMS to be hard-working and clearly dedicated to school improvement. However, as indicated in the discussion in the previous Domain, the lack of a coordinated data system does not exist at WEMS. This has prevented the school from using student assessment information to focus efforts on the root causes of student learning and instructional gaps. As a result, Worcester East Middle School lacks a shared expectation for high student achievement and a limited understanding exists as to how the school can uniformly implement teaching and learning standards to positively influence student academic performance.

A belief exists at WEMS that external factors, as opposed to instruction and related educational practices, dictate student learning capabilities. During focus groups conducted during the FF visit and in the final report out, staff members alluded on several occasions to the demographic variables the school faces as barriers to high student achievement. When asked about the most significant cause of low student performance on the DOE Instructional Staff Survey, the three most prevalent responses included (n=48):

- The lack of an academic foundation (students lack basic skills) – 38% of respondents
- Student and/or teacher apathy – 33% of respondents
- Demographic variables (socioeconomic status, attendance) – 25% of respondents

Worcester East Middle School faces the same difficulties that occur in many other urban education programs. Though additional hardships, these factors certainly do not preclude students from achieving at a high level. In order for students to reach their full potential, leadership and staff at WEMS must uniformly believe that work done within the boundaries of the school can positively affect student performance rates. They must also focus their attention on the factors that they can influence, namely the quality of curriculum and instruction.

The lack of a standardized, school-wide curriculum (see Domain 1) has also been influential in the inconsistent expectations for student performance. On the same DOE Instructional Staff Survey mentioned above, 12 percent only of respondents (n=48) indicated inconsistencies in the curriculum or lack of adherence to the Frameworks as factors contributing to low student performance rates. Comments included, for example: “There is no set curriculum for ELA. Therefore, there is not enough consistency in following the frameworks when teaching” – “Inconsistent use of frameworks and common standards for all students performance.” At least some instructional staff members identify the need for high expectations and consistent instruction as variables that have affected low student performance at WEMS.

Without a clear curriculum and explicit benchmarks, it is difficult to establish the appropriate rigor and pace in lessons. Based on the Department of Education (DOE) observation rubric, expectations for student achievement, and the rigor and pace of instruction was judged by the FF Team to be of an *unacceptable standard* in more than half of the lessons observed.

Elements of Classroom practice	Does not meet an acceptable standard (1)	Meets an acceptable standard (2)	Exemplifies good practice (3)
Expectations, pace and rigor of instruction	35/65 (54%)	26/65 (40%)	4/65 (6%)

The rigor and pace of instruction during classroom visits was characterized by a poor use of instructional time and expectations that were focused on behavior rather than high academic achievement. The overarching expectation in these classrooms appeared to be that students would behave and remain engaged in work for the entire period. Teachers continued to remind students what they were supposed to be doing and to stay focused, but few indicators suggested the same standards existed for academic engagement. In one classroom, students who had already completed work were asked to just sit and behave for the rest of the instructional period, rather than being presented with additional learning opportunities.

Some WEMS classrooms did possess high expectations, appropriate instructional rigor and a pace that was deemed *exemplary* or *acceptable* by the FF Team. These lessons began with a clear objective, linked the objective to the previous lesson and concluded with a summary of student academic accomplishments during the instructional period. Teaching practices maintained appropriate rigor, integrating difficult vocabulary words into the lesson, for example, and clarifying definitions that students did not understand. These lessons maintained high expectations for student achievement, teaching time was used to its full potential and the pace of instruction was appropriate for middle school students.

During the past year, one of the primary goals at Worcester East Middle School has been to reduce student behavior problems. Through implementation of the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) “STAR” system, WEMS has experienced significant decreases in disciplinary infraction rates. In October of 2004, there were 322 student discipline infractions. This has steadily decreased through each month of the school year, with only 182 reported disciplinary infractions in January 2005. Staff members also attribute the decline in disciplinary infractions to the work of the school’s three Assistant Principals, who maintain clear and consistent standards for student behavior and are readily available to assist when a

disciplinary problem arises. The implementation and execution of the PBIS program established a unified focus and clear behavioral expectations for the WEMS community. This is commendable and, further, indicates the school has the capacity to adhere to a unified vision that produces positive outcomes.

In order to assist the school in establishing a climate that reflects a unified vision that is focused on high student academic achievement, the FF Team recommends the following:

- *Establish a school-wide theme focused on high student achievement; that recognizes the school's diverse learners and persists throughout the WEMS community - students, parents, staff and leadership.* Thirty-three percent of respondents on the DOE Instructional Staff Survey cited lack of motivation/apathy as a primary reason for low student performance at WEMS. Use of a school-wide theme that is focused on teaching and learning may promote a positive and exciting educational atmosphere in which students, staff and leadership alike are all invested. Similar to the PBIS program that set forth a unified vision and clear behavioral expectations at WEMS, the implementation of a theme that establishes a school-wide focus on academic achievement is likely to yield similar results.
- *Utilize the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) and School Improvement Plan (SIP) development processes to provide a unified expectation for student achievement and school programs.* WEMS can utilize the upcoming PIM process to develop a SIP that provides a unified focus and expectation for student performance. Critical to this process is the incorporation of teaching and learning benchmarks and a standardized school curriculum to set a precedent for rigorous, unified instructional practice.

The faculty and staff at Worcester East Middle School are dedicated to school improvement. The reduction of disciplinary infractions this school year speaks not only to the success of the PBIS program but also to the school's ability to establish and implement a school-wide vision. In order to address the inconsistent expectations and varying rigor and pace of classroom instruction that currently exists, WEMS must set explicit and unified standards for curriculum implementation, teaching practices and student achievement goals. These should be documented in the School Improvement Plan and utilized uniformly throughout the school in daily practice.

### **III: Organizational Structure and Management**

The school day at Worcester East Middle School is structured as a middle school model with instructional teams. The implementation of the middle school model is not yet fully realized. Instructional teams are not being utilized to best meet the learning needs of the diverse student body. Common planning time should be more closely focused on academics. Though adequate personnel exist, the current leadership structure is not being used to effectively monitor instruction or related planning. As a result, the improvement initiatives are not currently receiving sufficient support.

The school day at Worcester East Middle School consists of a seven-day rotating schedule to incorporate common planning time while students are at enrichment activities. There are seven instructional teams: three seventh grade level teams, three eighth grade level teams and one team with both seventh and eighth grade students. Every team has an “honors” cohort and six teams integrate special education students. One team at each grade level also includes a cohort of English as a Second Language (ESL) students. While this organization is ideal for a middle school, WEMS does not use these teams to effectively increase appropriate educational opportunities for students based on achievement levels.

Within each instructional team, students are organized into groups that travel together throughout the day. The organization of students into cohorts provides considerable opportunities for grouping according to achievement/instructional levels across content areas. With the exception of the honors group, however, placement in cohorts is determined solely by student behavior and not academic skill level. A student who excels in English may require a slower pace in Math. Arrangement of instructional cohorts based on student achievement gains and continued skill deficits throughout the school year would not only make instructional planning easier, but would better address the varying degrees of student skill levels across content areas. Placement in the seventh-grade honors cohort is based solely on sixth grade math MCAS scores and teacher referral. These same students continue on the honors track in eighth grade, unless a teacher recommends otherwise. It is unclear how a single math score alone can determine “honors” placement across content areas and years. Because teaching practices at WEMS lack differentiated instructional strategies and classroom organization consists of heterogeneous student groups, it is the judgment of the FF Team that the diverse learning needs the school’s student population are not being sufficiently met.

Common planning time requires teachers to meet at least three times a week in their instructional teams to plan interdisciplinary efforts across subject levels. When asked about an agenda for common planning time, teachers reported that one meeting time a week was used to address improving student work, another to focus on instructional strategies and the last for parent conferences. Beyond this general structure, teachers could not describe how common planning time was used, or how meeting discussions specifically addressed the learning needs of students. The FF Team was provided with several copies of *Team Meeting Agendas* that documented brief discussion notes and instructional action plans; for example, “All team members attempt and use double entry journal.” While use of double-entry journals may be an effective instructional strategy, there is no evidence to link use of double-entry journals to student learning outcomes nor does an apparent strategic plan for successful implementation, other than participation, exist. Because WEMS does not possess a coordinated data system that can be used to assess student achievement and plan instructional strategies, it is difficult for teachers to measure the effectiveness of implemented initiatives. The Critical Friends program is reportedly being put in place at WEMS. This program for looking at student work employs a systematic method for assessing student achievement and discussing related instructional practices. Increased structure for common planning time and further focus on student work is likely to have greater impact on impact on performance rates at WEMS.

The current leadership structure at Worcester East Middle School is not being used to effectively monitor classroom instruction or related planning. Personnel with responsibilities for instructional leadership include the principal, three assistant principals, a literacy coach and five department chairs. The principal is the primary instructional leader in the school, while assistant principals focus almost solely on discipline. The literacy coach is a newly instituted position at WEMS this year. An interview with the literacy coach indicated that responsibilities include: serving as the school-based Turning Points coach, curriculum coordination, attending team meetings and numerous administrative responsibilities to assist the principal. The literacy coach could be a critical piece of the instructional leadership network at WEMS, but because this position has not been well-defined, oversight responsibilities are far too broad to be effectively met by one person, and school staff does not understand her role.

As described by the principal, department chairs are ultimately responsible for instructional oversight at the classroom level. Department chairs report that they make efforts to conduct classroom observations, but their time is limited. A clear description does not exist as to what these “oversight” responsibilities entail. The FF Team reviewed several *Department Chair Logs*. Documented feedback does not incorporate instruction-based suggestions to address student learning needs; for example:

- “Students active but engaged and respectful.”
- “Our book does a poor job at this (topic). Perhaps she (teacher) could research to find better resources for students.”
- “Need to meet to discuss grading and due dates.”

Furthermore, the department chairs all reside on the same instructional team, which significantly isolates personnel in these positions from teaching and learning practices that occur on other teams on a regular basis. While the principal reports that team leaders exist, their primary function is to serve on the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) and act as a conduit for disseminating information and not to oversee or support classroom instruction.

The system for overseeing and supporting instructional practices at WEMS is not adequate to meet the school’s needs. As a result, staff members are not receiving adequate feedback on teaching practices and are not held accountable for proper implementation of the curriculum or instructional strategies. This has likely contributed to the current inadequacies in these areas. Central to improving the quality of classroom practices is effective instructional leadership. In order for Worcester East Middle School to see improvements in student performance, a system for supporting classroom practices must be developed.

The FF Team recommends WEMS focus efforts on the following to increase the school’s organizational and leadership capacity:

- *Provide personnel to supervise the complete implementation of the middle school model based on the work of Turning Points.* Based on the work of Turning Points personnel, WEMS has implemented the foundations of an effective middle school model. In its current state, instructional teams and common planning time are not effectively supporting classroom practices as designed. A system of supervision must be instated to ensure that these programs

are being implemented effectively and are having the desired affect on classroom practices and student achievement.

- *Clearly define the structure of leadership roles and associated responsibilities to ensure a school-wide understanding of position functions so that staff can seek appropriate support when needed.* The assistant principals at WEMS – two of whom are new this year – have clearly defined responsibilities that primarily relate to monitoring and overseeing student behavior problems. Staff clearly understand the roles of the APs and access them to assist when behavioral disruptions occur. Their clearly defined roles have certainly contributed to a reduction in discipline issues. A similar school-wide and well-defined system must be established for instructional leadership. As inappropriate behavior continues to decrease at WEMS, use of the assistant principals in instructional leadership roles may also be beneficial, given their current successes and ideal locations on each floor of the building.
- *Encourage opportunities for participation in leadership positions to diversify and increase the number of staff members involved.* Considerable overlap exists in some of the leadership positions, as the same personnel maintain positions on the ILT, PIM team and as department chairs. WEMS has a number of new teachers and administrators on staff, whose ideas and experiences may be beneficial to the school community and the improvement planning efforts.
- *Implement a system of instructional oversight and frequent feedback that holds personnel in leadership positions accountable for monitoring the quality implementation of curriculum, instruction and associated planning at the classroom level.* While the impact of this system must be evident within the school's structure and specifically at the classroom level, the district also holds responsibility for ensuring that implementation of an effective instructional support system occurs (See Domain IV).

Worcester East Middle School has many organizational structures in place that are not being used to their full potential to support teaching and learning. In order to maximize the use and effectiveness of programs and personnel, it is critical that WEMS employ a systematic method for overseeing and supporting teaching, instructional planning and associated practices. This responsibility resides not only within the school, but at the district level.

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

While the district has implemented many programs at Worcester East Middle School in its efforts to support the school, there is insufficient instructional leadership and oversight, a lack of a coordinated data system to inform instruction and inadequate training in the improvement planning process. The following domain focuses solely on leadership and guidance needed from the district level to address the persistently low student performance rates at WEMS.

The FF Team was provided with a large list of programs and initiatives (fourteen) that central office is funding at Worcester East Middle School. These include, but are not limited to, Turning Points, Gear Up, New Teacher Institute and the Middle School Task Force. As reported by the

district, support for these programs also occurs in the form of staff development through the Office of Curriculum and Professional Development. The district has also supported WEMS by allocating a greater number of teachers and administrators to the school as compared to other middle schools in Worcester. When asked about program evaluation, the district supplied the FF Team with external records and/or evaluations that documented programs but did not connect implementation with increases in student achievement nor improved instructional practices. For example, documentation from the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program indicated that WEMS was a “certified AVID Site,” that a “strong commitment and involvement” existed at the school and “AVID practices and methodologies are presented to the faculty and incorporated in many classes.” While this documents a connection to classroom practices, it does not determine effectiveness. While the program evaluation from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center grant provided slightly more detailed information, analyses of academic performance were provided across the district – not at the school level. Therefore, specific impact at WEMS could not be established. Information that was disaggregated focused primarily on program (teacher and student) attendance. While Worcester Public Schools (WPS) has invested in numerous subsidiary programs with a focus on increasing student achievement, the district and school have few internal measures to evaluate whether or not implemented programs are having the desired effect on student performance.

WPS also provides numerous professional development opportunities across disciplines that all staff can attend to develop instructional skills as well as earn Professional Development Points (PDPs). These trainings are optional for staff. Only two mandated professional development days exist in the Worcester Public Schools, one of which is determined based on surveys conducted at the school level. Through the curriculum liaison, the district provides department chairs with further training and support. While all of these supports are of value, there is not a sound evaluation system in place to determine whether professional development opportunities and trainings have positively affected teaching practices. For example, the inconsistent use of curriculum guides is typical of how some resources are not being used to their full extent. In the opinion of the Fact Finding Team, monitoring and evaluation of program implementation needs to be strengthened in order to ensure that the many resources available actually impact daily practice at the school.

Though the district reports that clear oversight responsibilities exist, there is little evidence to suggest that this is occurring with sufficient frequency to effectively support teaching practices at the school level. Discussion in Domain III documented the ineffectiveness of instructional oversight and unclear roles and responsibilities for instructional leadership at the school level. At the district level, the quadrant manager is reportedly responsible for oversight of the school’s principal. A clear structure and schedule for regular meetings between the quadrant manager and principal was not evident. The Superintendent stated plans to implement regular visits and learning walks at the school, conducted by him and/or other district personnel as deemed necessary. And further, that the quadrant manager will begin to meet with the principal on a weekly basis. In order to increase the current instructional leadership capacities at WEMS, the district must increase their presence and offer guidance that school leaders can use to support teaching and learning at the classroom level.

Improving the availability of student achievement data is another key area for improvement. The district reports the Measures of Academic Progress assessment system is under implementation. This is likely to begin to resolve the current lack of student data in use at WEMS. In order that the MAP is utilized to its full effectiveness, the district must ensure that school staff are trained properly in its administration and that personnel are available to conduct meaningful analyses of student achievement data. Lastly, this information must be incorporated into improvement planning efforts and used to guide classroom practices.

The purpose of this diagnostic Fact Finding visit is to assist Worcester East Middle School in its initial planning for the new School Improvement Plan. As found by the Panel Review (November 2004) and documented in the Panel Review Report, the current WEMS SIP was found to be insufficient to guide the necessary improvements at the school. The training and support from the district level in the development of the previous SIP development was limited. The district provided WEMS with only a two-hour training on the Performance Improvement Mapping process to guide SIP development. Reports from staff and school leadership suggested the primary outcome of this training was the delivery of data for performance goals to be included in the SIP. More importantly, staff and leadership school-wide articulated a lack of understanding of the PIM process. Currently, WEMS does not have the capacity to effectively develop a sound SIP on their own. District personnel must be available to support the school in SIP development and supply adequate and knowledgeable feedback on the process.

Increased district presence and guidance is needed in order to fully support Worcester East Middle School in its improvement planning initiatives. In summary, it is the recommendation of the FF Team that the district employ the following priority actions to assist the school's efforts:

- *Employ an internal system for evaluating program effectiveness to ensure that implementation is providing the desired outcome.*
- *Create, implement and provide training on a standardized data system that can be used by the school throughout the year, to assess student skill levels, re-assess student gains and continued weaknesses and to plan instruction accordingly.* Assuming that the MAP is employed at WEMS and that leadership and staff members are properly trained in how to use this assessment system, this is a strong foundation that the district and school can build upon.
- *Develop a systematic method for supporting instructional leadership at WEMS.*
- *Build the capacity at the school level, to continue ongoing, school-wide improvement planning that is meaningful to the WEMS community.*

Though the district has implemented many programs to support success at Worcester East Middle School, monitoring of implementation is limited. As a result, it is unclear how (or if) these efforts have had the intended impact on student achievement. District curriculum guides are not being used effectively and instructional leadership has not received sufficient guidance to effectively designate tasks associated with instructional oversight. To ensure that improvement

and planning efforts at WEMS are implemented to their full potential, increased district presence and guidance is needed to ensure that current initiatives are implemented with fidelity.

## **Conclusion**

Worcester East Middle School has several foundations in place that can be built upon as the improvement planning process begins. This includes a school day structure that closely resembles the middle school model, an effective disciplinary system that has assisted in decreasing student behavior problems and an adequate number of personnel to support educational programs. However, low student performance rates have persisted at the school. WEMS, in conjunction with the district, must increase energy and attention to the variables most critical to student academic achievement.

The lack of a coordinated data system both at the school and district levels is central to current inadequacies at Worcester East Middle School. Because the school does not have a systematic and ongoing method for measuring achievement, learning gaps have not been accurately identified, which has limited the effectiveness of the current educational programs. This is evident in the limited rigor, pace and quality of instructional practices, the inconsistencies in curriculum implementation and varying expectations for student achievement.

WEMS must focus attention on maximizing the implementation of the middle school model to better utilize instructional teams and common planning time to meet the diverse learning needs of the student population. School and district leadership must connect to ensure that frequent instructional oversight is in place, to identify and support poor teaching practices and recognize exemplary instruction.

Improvement planning at Worcester East Middle School must be a collaborative process between the school and the district that is based on a shared vision for high achievement and unified efforts to support aspects of educational programming that are most influential to student performance.

**APPENDIX A**  
**FACT FINDING PANEL REVIEW SCHEDULE**  
**Detailed Schedule for Fact Finding 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: 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**

**Joe Trunk**, Chair, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA

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

**Ann Deveney**, Team Member, Director of English Language Arts, Boston Public Schools, Boston, MA

**Willette Johnson**, Team Member, School Support Specialist, Springfield Public Schools, Springfield, MA

**Chad Mazza**, Team Member, Asst. Principal, Morningside Community School, Pittsfield, MA

**Sandra Moriarty**, Team Member, Principal, Eastford Road School, Southbridge Public Schools, Southbridge, MA

**Robin Thorpe**, Team Member, Teacher, Henry Lord Middle School, Fall River Public Schools, Fall River, MA

**Andy Tuite**, Team Member, School Support Specialist, Boston Public Schools, Boston, MA

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