

School Panel Review Report Worcester East Middle School 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 Worcester East Middle School met this criteria and was one of 15 schools selected for panel review in Fall/Winter of 2004-05. The panel review was conducted on November 16-17, 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 Worcester East Middle School 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.

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 percent 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 AYP 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.¹ 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

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

and 20 percent in Warning. In 2003, 37 percent were Proficient, 51 percent were in Needs Improvement and 12 percent were 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 Limited English Proficient (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.

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 was 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.

PANEL RESPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS

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

No. The School Improvement Plan (SIP) created by the Worcester East Middle School contains some of the elements of a sound plan but it does not reflect an in-depth analysis of student learning needs. Its strategies, actions and timeline are insufficient to guide the significant improvement needed at the school to promote student success.

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 Worcester East Middle School Improvement Plan identifies broad gaps in student achievement but does not accurately determine why those gaps exist. The School Improvement Plan (SIP), constructed as a result of a district-wide professional development meeting last spring, does not represent a thorough analysis of multiple data sources to accurately identify learning gaps. The plan describes learning gaps at the level of the broad strands in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks rather than describing the specific knowledge and skills needed to achieve proficiency in applying and using their learning. The SIP identifies the same gaps for all student populations in the school and lists the same causes for their prevalence. The reasons cited for the existence of the gaps in the school's SIP are not derived from an analysis of reliable data on classroom practices or program effectiveness. As a result, the causes and strategies designed to address the causes may or may not be the actions that will lead to student success.

Faculty at the Worcester East Middle School (WEMS) gathered with other teachers around the district on a staff development day in March, 2004 to examine student performance data, establish causes for student learning gaps and develop action plans to address those particular learning needs. Based on their review of recent MCAS data, the Worcester East Middle School determined broad gaps in student learning but did not explicitly define the knowledge and skills that hinder student success. The SIP lists student learning needs as deficits in reading and writing strategies across the curriculum, and problems in numeracy and geometry. It also provides a bulleted list of "areas of need," which include a "comprehensive and coordinated assessment of student performance in math and ELA" to align instruction with the Massachusetts Frameworks, "a school wide emphasis on mathematics," and "a school-wide emphasis on the development of writing skills." Student learning needs mentioned in the school's Student Learning Objectives include, in ELA, "students will be able to identify, analyze, and apply knowledge of text across the curriculum and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding." While these areas may represent accurate categories of student learning gaps, the skills and knowledge teacher should focus on are not defined explicitly enough to guide instructional improvement. As written, the objective includes a vast array of literacy needs rather than a focused, targeted set of skills and knowledge weaknesses specific to WEMS students.

Other than MCAS, the WEMS faculty and leaders did not indicate review of other sources of student performance information to verify or corroborate their conclusions drawn from the state test results. In the SIP document provided to the panel, the “Worcester Public Schools Evidence Checklist” offers a list of possible data sources to be used by school level SIP team members, but none of the items are checked by the WEMS team. An interview with the Leadership Team corroborated the panelists’ conclusion that MCAS was the sole source of student performance information that was used to develop the school’s plans.

Another area of concern in the quality of the school’s efforts to identify learning gaps and define improvement goals is the lack of differentiation in the SIP between the learning needs of the aggregate group and the important subgroups at WEMS of Hispanic, Special Education, and White students – groups which have consistently under-performed on the MCAS exam. Although the numerical Student Performance Goals in the plan change for each subgroup, the Student Learning Objectives, Plan of Action and Causes remain the same. The gaps and causes are not prioritized to encourage faculty to focus their instructional change efforts. For example, the list of “Significant Causes that Determined Student Learning Objectives and Improvement Objectives” in math for the aggregate group are the same for each subgroup, as is its corresponding “Category of Cause.” This is also true in the ELA plan, with a different set of causes and slightly different improvement goals. In a focus group, school leaders confirmed the panelists’ understanding that the plan identified the same causes, categories of causes, and student learning objectives for each population of students in the school. In interviews with school leaders, department chairs confirmed their belief that, since the needs across the school were so extensive, the needs of specific subgroups would be addressed as a matter of course by teachers’ attention to the general population.

The school’s determination of the causes of student weaknesses does not reflect a thorough examination of the factors likely to be contributing to the learning gaps. The WEMS plan includes the same four ‘causes’ for all sub-populations of students and classifies the causes as “instruction.” For example, faculty members proposed at the staff development day that “students need additional instruction and support to address gaps in grade level foundation and knowledge” as a reason for low levels of student achievement. In other words, school personnel attribute deficiencies in student skills prior to entering the school as the reason for low achievement at WEMS. Staff members claim that, because students attend WEMS for only two years, gaps in skills and knowledge developed in prior settings are likely to impact achievement while in seventh and eighth grade. While this is certainly the case, the school’s causes reflect the belief that students come to the school behind in their academic achievement, and that the learning gaps are a pre-existing condition over which WEMS staff have little impact. Interviews with the principal, teachers, and department heads served to verify that staff does not have a unified understanding of why student learning lags: we’re “trying to figure it out,” one teacher said.

As described by school personnel, teachers, administrators and district staff, the causes were taken from a brainstorming session conducted during the March staff development day. They were not derived from an analysis of current instructional practices at Worcester East, nor were they corroborated by more extensive analysis of entering student competencies. As will be discussed in later sections of this report, the actions derived from the school’s listed ‘causes’

often do not logically connect. For example, if the cause of weakness is additional instructional time to address pre-existing gaps, none of the strategies listed in the WEMS Action Plan suggest ways to extend learning time.

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

No. While the "Student Improvement Goals" do include precise quantitative measures based on the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) calculations provided by the Department of Education, the learning objectives, improvement objectives and outcome benchmarks are often vague or unmeasurable and are only weakly tied to the school's identified areas of student weakness.

Four types of goals and objectives are listed in the WEMS plan: Student Performance Goals; Student Learning Objectives; Improvement Objectives; and Outcome Benchmarks. The student performance goals identify the specific gains in MCAS results desired for each subject area and student group. While precisely defined in measurable terms, the goals are daunting and may not represent a realistic expectation. For example, a goal for special education students proposes to increase from 0 percent achieving a proficient/advanced in ELA MCAS to 41 percent receiving proficient/advanced for the 2005 assessment. For the aggregate population, the ELA performance goal is to decrease the percentage of students in Warning from 18 percent to 9 percent and increase the percentage in Proficient and Advanced from 28 percent to 38 percent. It is admirable for the school to recognize the depth of its students' needs by establishing rigorous targets related to the requirements to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), but recent evidence from the 2004 MCAS results suggest the school is not likely to reach such high standards. The goal was based on 2003 MCAS performance for seventh graders, and the 2004 results indicate that there is an increase (rather than a decrease) in the number of students scoring in the Warning category (23 percent) and a modest increase in the percentage reaching Proficiency (33 percent).

Student learning objectives in the WEMS improvement plan are stated in the language of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks at the level of the strand. In ELA, one student learning objective states, "Students will be able to identify, analyze and apply knowledge of text across the curriculum and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding." WEMS student performance is sufficiently weak to suggest that such a broad goal is in fact an accurate representation of their needs. However, an objective this broad offers little guidance on the particular skill that hinders students from analyzing text. Is it fluency or comprehension? Is it decoding? Or, did students choose not to persist in writing a response requiring supporting information? Without greater detail defining the type of skill or knowledge that impedes student performance, the student learning objectives are inadequate.

Additional student learning objectives are vague or immeasurable. One outcome objective declares that students will ". . . develop coherent writing samples." Another offers: "Students will be able to read text with good comprehension." These outcome objectives do apply to the reading and writing needs reflected in the weak MCAS results demonstrated by WEMS students

over the years, but they represent a target that is unclearly defined. Without a guide to determine whether one writing sample is “coherent” or not or what tool can determine whether students in fact have “good comprehension,” the objectives are too weak to provide a useful guide for tracking the impact of the school’s improvement initiatives.

Several of the outcome benchmarks/ objectives are quantifiable (e.g., “pre- and post-test assessments”) but others are less clear and may be less reliable (“teacher-made assessments”). Similarly, some of the actions specified in the SIP are observable changes in instructional behavior (“reference the frameworks and the WPS (Worcester Public Schools) benchmarks in lesson plans”), and others are unclear (“standardize instruction in all classes”). Interviews with school leaders and teachers revealed agreement and common understanding of the expectation that teachers include standards in their lesson plans and hand them in for monitoring, but there was less common understanding of things such as ‘standardize instruction.’ Until there is broad awareness and common agreement about what instructional changes will look like and expectations for teacher behavior are clearly defined, the plan is unlikely to have its desired impact.

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

No. As suggested in the previous section of this report, the strategies identified by the SIP, the principal’s Leadership Report and staff interviews do not directly address student learning needs and, as a result, are not likely to lead to improved student results. In general, the action plan in the WEMS improvement plan describes planning tasks for teachers but omits definition of changes in instructional strategies. Furthermore, the actions are indirectly related to the student learning objectives and are similarly remotely connected to the desired outcomes.

In the WEMS improvement plan, the strategies listed in the action plans include planning or assessment tasks to be performed by the teachers. Three items appear repeatedly: (1) pre- and post-testing of writing skills (ELA) and geometry and measurement (math); (2) teachers will reference frameworks and WPS benchmarks in lesson plans; and (3) teachers will standardize instruction in all classes. These action plans are designed to address significant deficiencies in student reading, writing and knowledge of measurement and geometry. In the judgment of the panelists, these teacher activities are not likely to directly impact student learning in part because there is no explicit expectation that teachers adopt instructional strategies that will target the precise skills and knowledge that limits student success in reading, writing, or geometry and measurement. School leaders reported they rely on informal “pop-ins” to monitor classroom instruction, and assistant principals reported they are typically engaged in addressing a discipline issue when they step into a class rather than examining the quality of instruction. Teachers confirmed they receive little written feedback from school leaders beyond the required formal observations that are part of the contractual teacher evaluation process.

In addition to the actions/strategies being indirectly connected to student learning needs, they are only vaguely connected to the desired learning outcomes. For example, the three actions listed above are expected to result in the outcome/student learning objective, “Students will be able to

read with good comprehension.” In the judgment of the panelists, a set of pre- and post-tests, while likely to provide useful information to guide instruction, are not likely to lead to improved student learning unless specific changes in instructional practices take place. A similar lack of connection is present in the mathematics section of the plan. The action steps include teachers referencing the frameworks in their lesson plans, following the math department outline and curriculum map (defines the scope and sequence of topics to be covered), and standardizing instruction using the new text as reference. With no definition of what ‘standardized instruction’ looks like, this action plan offers insufficient guidance for teachers or school leaders. The expected outcome of these actions for students is defined as the outcome/student learning objective: “Students will demonstrate an understanding of concepts and apply formulas and procedures for determining measures including area, perimeter/circumference, and volume of geometric figures incorporating proper use of vocabulary and terminology.” Again, the panelists concluded that administering a test, enhancing written lesson plans, and an unclear “standardization” of instruction will not result in the vast improvements defined in the outcome objective.

In addition to the action plan strategies listed in the school’s SIP, two other efforts designed to improve achievement are underway. The school has been a “Turning Points” school for the previous three years. The Turning Points program is designed to raise teacher skill at diagnosing student needs and adjust instruction in suitable ways to address those needs. The addition of the fourth year of Turning Points this year is a special expenditure of the district to support the school’s efforts toward success. However, the Turning Points coordinator indicated there has been no external evaluation of the impact of the program on teaching practice at WEMS, and the continuing record of poor student results does not suggest sufficient positive gains as a result of the school’s participation. The panel concluded that the twice-monthly presence of the Turning Points coach is unlikely to bring about the extensive change needed to raise student achievement.

The AVID program (Advancement Via Individual Determination) is in its second year at WEMS and seeks to raise student achievement by targeting specific students identified as able but unmotivated. Students identified for the AVID program are enrolled in classes with lower enrollment than the average. To date, there are no data – either student performance data or a systematic review of classroom practices – on which to evaluate the impact of the program or to predict whether AVID will produce the positive change anticipated.

Overall, the action plan defined by the Worcester East Middle School defines steps that, while being useful strategies for good teaching, are not likely to lead to changes in the instructional practices and learning experience of the students essential to reverse the trend of weak achievement among the students.

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

For the most part, the SIP developed by the Worcester East Middle School clearly describes the tasks expected of teachers to implement the plan. However, as discussed in detail in the preceding section of this report, the expected tasks are quite modest and are not actions that are

likely to have a direct positive impact on student learning. The most significant weakness in the document is the lack of coherent connection between the teacher changes and student learning outcomes.

In some aspects, the School Improvement Plan “action plans” section clearly describes tasks to be performed by teachers that are intended to improve student learning outcomes. However, the tasks are not likely to directly impact student learning to any great extent because they are not focused on instructional change. As described previously, one of the actions expected of teachers is to “standardize instruction” – an undefined term that is not clearly explained. Also absent are defined systems by which school leaders gather and analyze data to assess each task’s effectiveness.

Other actions – such as pre- and post-tests and including frameworks references on lesson plans – are clear and specific and would not be confused or misinterpreted. As stated earlier, these tasks are modest expectations and are not likely to change the learning opportunities for students.

Outcome benchmarks in the SIP are very broadly defined and are not suitable for measuring periodic progress. For example, the measure of progress for both the ELA and math goals states, “analysis of pre- and post-test assessments.” Neither department chairs nor teachers could explain what the analysis would consist of, beyond a review of common errors by content topics on the pre-test. It also appears that the timeliness of the process may be an issue that limits its effectiveness. While on site for the review, the panel learned that the pre-test for this school year had only recently been completed and that subject area staff members had not yet met to conduct their analysis. Panelists found it significant that the first quarter of the school year had recently ended and the staff had not yet reviewed the math and ELA pre-test results.

Other student learning outcomes are vague and not clearly defined. Samples include: “Students will be able to read text with good comprehension.” and, “Students will demonstrate understanding of text across the curriculum and develop coherent writing samples.” Teachers reported that, while they do occasionally discuss student performance at their weekly common planning time, there is no required agenda for coming to agreement on concepts such as ‘good comprehension’ or ‘coherent’ writing. The Turning Points program is designed to encourage such conversations, but the presence of the coach only two times per month limits the impact of this initiative.

The lack of a logical connection between action steps and expected outcomes is the weakest aspect of the WEMS improvement plan. The example of an action step cited previously in mathematics (“Teachers will standardize instruction in all classes using new text as a reference/guide.”) is not coherently connected with the associated student learning outcome (“Students will demonstrate an understanding of concepts and apply formulas and procedures for determining measures including area, perimeter/circumference, and volume of geometric figures (8M3) incorporating use of proper vocabulary and terminology.”). The same action step listed in the ELA section of the plan is followed by the expected student outcome, “Students will be able to read text with good comprehension.” Although it is possible to draw broad connections between some of the school’s action steps and their student learning outcomes, it is difficult to see how most of the lesson plan or pre/post-step actions will directly influence student growth

and understanding in geometry or reading comprehension. If the connection is unclear to the panelists, it is likely also difficult for a teacher to have a clear idea of what teaching changes to make to improve student learning of particular knowledge and skills.

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

Yes. Staff members at Worcester East Middle School expressed support for the steps needed to implement the improvement plan. After interviewing 20 or more teachers, it was clear the action steps were at least partly, if not fully, being implemented as defined in the plan. However, the panel concluded that even if the plan is fully implemented as written, it is not likely to have a significant impact on student performance, given the indirect and often unclear impact of the proposed initiatives on student learning.

The process for developing the School Improvement Plan was a transparent one. Based on interviews with the Worcester Public Schools Superintendent, district personnel, the WEMS principal, teachers, and School Improvement Council, the process by which the SIP was created was delineated. For teachers, a professional development day was held in March 2004 when they evaluated MCAS scores from the previous year and brainstormed areas of concern for students. They met in department groups, cluster groups and as a faculty to identify those areas in which students need most improvement. Those findings were turned over to the department heads, the literacy coach and the principal, who wrote the plan. Parents' roles were to suggest ways to increase parental involvement in the school – a component of the Family Involvement section of the SIP. Parents did not participate in the discussion of academic improvement. Once the plan was written by the four-person core team, it was sent to the district and then on to the school committee, who asked that the section on PBIS (the behavior management program partially instituted this year at WEMS) be developed more thoroughly. The principal completed the revisions and the plan became finalized and was distributed to all staff near the start of the school year.

The panel review team concluded that the process by which the SIP was developed will support its successful implementation. Teachers expressed support for the plan because it was based on their own ideas. While the process for crafting the language and format of the School Improvement Plan was limited in its scope and participation, there has been widespread communication about the core actions required in the plan; namely, the inclusion of frameworks references in teachers' lesson plans, the distribution of active reading strategies by the AVID coordinator, and the posting of vocabulary in all content area classrooms. Most teachers are complying with these requirements. As stated earlier, however, in the judgment of the panel, these modest steps are not likely to lead to accelerated student learning demanded by the extensive needs of the WEMS student population.

An important limiting factor in the influence the plan's modest expectations will have on student achievement is the undefined system for holding teachers accountable for actually changing classroom instruction. Teachers are handing in weekly lesson plans at the beginning of each week, with limited or informal feedback from their department heads. Department heads do

informal ‘walk-arounds’ but it is unclear if this is to check on lesson plan implementation. They also informally and sporadically chat with teachers concerning the work of the classroom.

Assistant principals also said that they are in and out of the classrooms “for other reasons” rather than assessing instructional practice, but “see” what is being learned. The staff is clear about the implementation of the actions in the SIP, and the majority believes that the plan will be successful in its goals of decreasing student-learning gaps. However, many were not content with the numeric goals and felt that they were unrealistic. When the panel review team asked the ILT about the student performance goals, one teacher stated, “We were given the goals. We would not have come up with those goals. We would have chosen smaller outcomes.” She felt the goals were unachievable. Plan outcomes are not regularly evaluated in other cases. The math SIP for 2004-2005 was purposely kept identical to the 2003-2004 plan because, as the department and district personnel explained, there was no movement or growth in student achievement. They thought the improvement strategies needed more time to take effect. Without a more detailed inquiry into the actions that were, in fact, fully implemented in contrast with those that were not (and comparing that information with student performance results), the WEMS plans cannot be considered sound.

Although this SIP was created through a modified collaborative effort and is being implemented, it will not provide the extensive change in students’ learning experiences that are necessary to improve achievement at Worcester East Middle School. The plan has support from all of its stakeholders. There is cooperation between principal, department heads and teachers in handing in weekly lesson plans and participating in the PBIS program. Nevertheless, there are limited attempts to revisit the plan to see if it is working. The plan’s analysis of student data is limited in its scope and reflection of students’ learning needs. It does not define strategies that are clearly and measurably tied to those needs. Nor does the plan develop a process by which teaching and learning are evaluated and professional development is encouraged and provided.

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

No. The panel concluded that the conditions are not in place for the successful implementation of a sound improvement plan for Worcester East Middle School. The plan as currently written has many structures in place and staff members are implementing the designated actions; however, the weaknesses in the plan include inadequate breadth, detail and focus sufficient to improve student learning. The school’s leaders are limited in their ability to guide constructive diagnostic and prescriptive conversations among teachers based on student performance and program information, and district support for the implementation of the plan has been insufficient to remedy the school’s gaps.

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

Somewhat. While the day-to-day operating management of the school is effective, there is less strong evidence of regular and thorough oversight of instructional practices. Limitations in the ability of instructional leaders to guide teachers in refining their instructional practice is one factor contributing to the panel's lack of confidence in the plan's impact. While support for the principal and assistant principals was generally strong, the panel noted an overall sense of lethargy and passivity in the professional climate. Finally, staff and administrative turnover was pointed out as a concern and is likely a factor in the school's inability to sustain a common approach to teaching that raises student achievement.

Instructional guidance is distributed among the principal, assistant principals and department chairs, but other than formal evaluations, there is no structured system to give useful feedback to teachers on the quality of their work. Teachers are not required to assess and revise their classroom instruction in light of student performance evidence, in part because MCAS data is the only measure referenced for noting student achievement. Without structured guidance on using additional local or school-based information about students to make appropriate adjustments to teaching practice, there is unlikely to be major improvement in the learning opportunities at WEMS.

According to the instructional staff survey, staff confidence in the leadership is moderate, both at the principal and at the Instructional Leadership Team levels. Teachers characterize the principal as "caring," and suggest that the assistant principals are "responsive." In staff surveys and interviews, the staff expressed confidence that the principal was trying her best, with comments such as "provides opportunities for leadership," "has improved with new assistant principals...they can get to fights more quickly," "the principal is caring and supportive." In the surveys, the teacher response to "Our principal provides effective leadership," 11 percent strongly agreed, 33 percent agreed, 16 percent were unsure, 33 percent disagreed, 7 percent strongly disagreed. While not uniformly positive, there was general consensus among the staff interviewed during the visit that the principal offered reasonable support for the school's efforts.

The principal explained that her oversight of instructional effectiveness is mostly anecdotal and informal, and does not result in written feedback except in the case of formal observation visits. As noted earlier, the assistant principals mostly visit classrooms to deal with discipline issues, and only incidentally note classroom practices. Department chairs are not evaluators and note classroom effectiveness only informally. Their schedules of preparation time limit the range of teachers they can visit for collegial coaching or other formative intervention. Teachers reported that their common planning time is not structured to be used for discussion of instructional practices, except when Turning Points is operating or at random occasions when a topic of interest is raised by one of the team members. With such modest instructional leadership and oversight, there is little expectation that productive changes are likely to occur to make the improvement plan have a positive impact on student achievement.

The school climate, while calm and orderly, is not one of excitement and engagement in academic pursuits. In the classrooms, students were generally attentive and polite, but there was little enthusiasm for their work. There was low energy on the part of leadership and the teachers, with one staff member's phrase, "We're doing what we can," capturing the sense of acquiescence displayed by the staff. Their belief that students bring with them insurmountable gaps in learning likely contributes to the lack of energy.

Staff turnover at both the teacher and administrator level is a third factor limiting the effectiveness of the school's leadership and management. Twenty-six of the fifty-two instructional staff report fewer than five year's teaching experience, four are listed as in their first year, and eight teaching staff list too little information to determine their longevity. Two of the three assistant principals are new to the school this year. The principal has been in her position for four years. This rate of fluctuation among administrative and instructional staff creates challenges for instituting common routines, expectations and practices to promote the social, as well as the academic, goals of the school. Instructional leadership is devoted to orienting new faculty and staff to core programs and curricula, with few remaining resources (time, personnel) to work with experienced staff to enhance their practice.

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

Yes, there is general support among the staff for the planned improvement efforts. In teacher surveys and interviews, teachers know what is expected of them, based upon the modest expectations listed in the school improvement plan and the school's vision for improvement. The faculty is also engaged in implementing the plan by carrying out the strategies defined in the action steps; namely, handing in lesson plans and following the PBIS behavior program. However, as noted in previous sections of this report, even full implementation of the WEMS plan is unlikely to lead to improved student learning because the actions and tasks are modest and only indirectly connected to student learning gaps.

In the instructional staff survey, teachers' responses to the question, "Do you know what you are expected to do to improve student performance according to your school's improvement plan?" were affirmative. Some of their comments indicate their familiarity with the expectations of the plan: "The school improvement plan emphasizes the need to improve students' proficiency in both math and ELA," "Yes, improve literacy and numeracy so that students may improve MCAS scores," and "All teachers know it is the goal of the school improvement plan to increase our math and ELA scores in all subgroups of students. It is up to each individual teacher to work on their own as well as with other teachers to develop strategies to reach these goals." In staff interviews, the panel review team found the same consensus. Staff members said that they did believe the SIP would make a difference and that implementation of its strategies would improve student performance. Some of their comments about the plan's impact were: improves "comprehension skills," collaboration has "increased and is effective," and the plan "offers ways to integrate subjects like science with math." Overall, the staff understands the expectations of the SIP and is engaged in implementing it.

On Monday mornings, all staff members hand in weekly lesson plans, which they use on a daily basis. There is flexibility allowed by both principal and department heads in what teachers are able to accomplish each week, based upon students' needs and daily requirements of the school. However, when teachers and school leaders were asked to evaluate the impact of these actions on student learning outcomes or to offer a definition for "standardization of teaching," they were unable to answer with any hard data, strategies for analysis, or common definitions.

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

While the Worcester East Middle School has received a moderate level of support from the district for its extensive student needs, the district has not offered satisfactory guidance on the development of a plan that is specific to WEMS, contains measurable short- and long-term benchmarks, or that includes strategies that will directly impact student learning.

The Worcester School District provides some specific resources to support the school's improvement plans. The district provided a fourth year of the services of the Turning Points coach after the conclusion of the CSRD grant. District leaders expressed their belief that an additional year of Turning Points would enhance to the school's improvement efforts. The district has plans to provide diagnostic data for schools using the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment, a customized criterion-referenced test keyed to both the state curriculum standards and to the Worcester Public Schools benchmarks. Plans to add this assessment arose from the Superintendent's belief that schools and teachers did not have adequate diagnostic tools to identify and target specific student weaknesses. The MAP assessments are scheduled to begin in January.

District efforts to support the school by assigning appropriate personnel to the Worcester East Middle School are constrained by contract. At the time of completion of the staff profile, WEMS employed 12 full-time substitute teachers. The panelists raised concerns that the high number of substitutes, along with the high turnover rate among instructional staff, seriously restricts the school's ability to build the learning culture envisioned in the principal's leadership report.

Some district support is unavailable because of policy decisions. Characteristics of WEMS student population indicate the school would qualify for Title 1 services, but the district chose to channel all its federal funding for Title 1 to its elementary schools. This policy decision has a direct impact on the resources available to support struggling students at Worcester East.

Worcester District personnel offered direct support for the construction of the WEMS School Improvement Plan. At the March 2004 staff development day (when the plan was constructed), district personnel guided schools through the PIM process adapted for use in the district. WEMS staff completed the required worksheets and brainstormed likely causes of poor student performance, and a core set of WEMS personnel composed the draft document. However, district personnel did not provide feedback on the quality of the plan or its components. School teams submitted their plans to the Board of Education, who responded with requests for clarification or revision. The panel review team has judged the resulting plan to be inadequate in many aspects, most critically in its lack of logical connection between student learning gaps,

improvement strategies and anticipated learning outcomes. The plan was developed without thoughtful and skilled guidance and constructive meaningful feedback from district personnel. As a result, it is lacking the qualities of a sound plan in many ways. The absence of district support in the form of accurate constructive feedback on the plan's components contributes to the weakness in the final document.

CONCLUSION

In the judgment of the panel team, the improvement plan developed by the Worcester East Middle School is inadequate to guide school efforts to raise student achievement. The panel review team's conclusion that the WEMS plan is not sound is based on a review that determined the plan does not contain an analysis of appropriate data and program information, nor does it reflect a systematic collection of sufficient information to examine pedagogical strategies or to locate actual root causes of student learning gaps that are within the school's control. The school's performance objectives are not grounded in a deep and thorough analysis of a range of student performance indicators. The specific strategies for change, which are highlighted in the SIP, are not likely to lead to improved student achievement because they are only indirectly related to student learning needs and to the desired outcomes. Although the improvement objectives are clear and the SIP process was transparent, the plan is not specific enough and tailored to the needs of each subgroup of student, or to individual students, to lead to the extensive changes in teaching that will have a positive impact on learning.

Although the staff does support the planned improvement efforts, they had a limited role in creating the plans and are not involved in evaluating the effectiveness of the plan's strategies on an ongoing basis. Worcester School District leaders and staff are aware of the broad range of student learning gaps at WEMS, but provide only moderate guidance through its initial involvement with the creation of the SIP. The school lacks sufficient qualified permanent staff and has been challenged by high turnover across the previous four years, issues related to district staffing policies and resources. Under the current conditions, the panelists concluded that there is insufficient capacity among the personnel at WEMS to implement a sound plan for student improvement.

APPENDIX A
Team Members

Dr. Karen Laba, Panel Chair, Director of Resource Development, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA.

Dr. Jody Price, Panel Co-Chair, Consultant, SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA.

Matthew Pakos, Panel Coordinator, Office of Accountability and Targeted Assistance,
Massachusetts Department of Education, Malden, MA.

Margaret Kelliher, Panel Team Member, Supervisor of Project LEAD, Springfield Public
Schools, Springfield, MA.

Maryann Malinowski, Panel Team Member, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Monson
Public Schools, Monson, MA.

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

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

Day 1

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

Day 2

All activities take place in the school

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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