

Panel Report
Candidate Compass School Review
Mill Swan Communication Skills Center
Worcester Public Schools

INTRODUCTION

The Program

The Commonwealth Compass Schools Program is one part of the Massachusetts School and District Accountability System. The purpose of the Compass Schools Program is to recognize and celebrate improvement in Massachusetts' schools, and to disseminate information and encourage networking and sharing of ideas, effective practices, and models for success. The program is intended to provide a means for the schools to share their expertise with other schools in the state.

In 2005, 197 schools that made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) during the last two years and exceeded their improvement targets for both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics in the aggregate and/or for all reported subgroups were invited to apply to the program. Eighty of those schools chose to apply by submitting completed applications. The applications provided written responses to three questions on the initiatives undertaken to improve student performance that school leaders and staff think have had the most positive impact on their students' performance. Six high schools, six elementary schools, one middle school, one kindergarten through grade 8, one grade 7 through 12 regional school, and one charter school were selected as finalists. Those 16 schools were scheduled for a panel review to learn more about their highlighted programs and to determine their willingness and capacity to serve in the program. Data and information gathered from the applications and reviews of these schools will be published in a report this fall.

The Commissioner will designate up to 16 schools to serve as 2005 Commonwealth Compass Schools. Compass Schools receive special recognition and a \$10,000 grant to support the participation of their administrators and staff in information sharing and dissemination activities over the next year.

The Report

This report summarizes the findings and analyses of a small team of education professionals during a one-day visit to Mill Swan Communication Skills Center on June 2, 2005. The report will assist the Commissioner in determining which schools from among those visited will be designated to serve as 2005 Commonwealth Compass Schools.

The panel evaluated data and written information on the school's performance and improvement efforts, including the school's Compass School application. Panelists then visited the school to meet with school leaders, staff, parents, and students, and to visit classrooms in order to answer the following two key questions:

1. Is this school using effective improvement initiatives that could be replicated in other similarly profiled schools?
2. Are the conditions in place for this school to serve as a model of effective practices and successful improvement initiatives?

The panel's responses to these two questions frame the report. In the process of answering these questions, the report focuses primarily on the initiatives that the school identified in its application as having had the most positive impact on student performance.

The findings and conclusions presented here are the products of analysis, discussion, and observation, and are based on the evidence made available to the panel before and during its visit. A list of panel members who participated in the school panel review is provided in Appendix A. A detailed schedule of the panel's activities is provided in Appendix B.

School Profile

Mill Swan Communication Skills Center, a public elementary school with a total enrollment of 202 students in Grades K through 6, serves a student population that is 37% White, 30% Hispanic, 22% Black, 10% Asian, and 1% Native American. Of the total population, 68% of students are Low Income, 40% have a First Language Not English, 30% receive Special Education services, and 25% are Limited English Proficient.

The school's 2004 student attendance rate was 94.8%, close to the state average of 94.2% for the same year. In 2004, 5.6% of the student population was retained, 0.5% of the population received in-school suspensions, and 2.0% of students received out-of-school suspensions.

The city of Worcester has 47 public schools, 36 of which serve Grades PK or K through 6. Of all the public schools in the district, Mill Swan has the highest percentage (30%) of students receiving Special Education services.

Staffing

Mill Swan Communication Skills Center is led by one principal, who has served as principal at the school for two years and as assistant principal for another two. The principal comes from a 23-year teaching background; her most recent teaching assignment was in Grade 4. She holds two master's degrees, one in General Education and one in Special Education. Working with the principal is one assistant principal who, despite having administrative duties, teaches full-time with a master's degree in Elementary Education. The school also has a NCLBIT, or No Child Left Behind Implementation Teacher, who works on curriculum planning, leads teacher roundtables on content-area and pedagogical topics, and enters classrooms to undertake peer coaching and to provide other assistance.

The school has one class per grade, Kindergarten through Grade 6. Class sizes vary substantially from grade to grade. The classroom teachers who instruct students in these grades are licensed

in their areas and are Highly Qualified. One Moderate and three Severe Disabilities Sole Content Instructors are also employed at the school, each with a license in the area in which they teach and with a Highly Qualified designation. Part-time Art, Music, and Physical Education teachers, who are shared with other elementary schools in the district, also serve students at Mill Swan.

MCAS Results

The school has made Adequate Yearly Progress for the past two years. The school's Cycle III Performance Ratings in both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics were *Moderate* at 1.7 points above the State Performance Target in ELA and 11.8 points above the State Performance Target in math. The school achieved *Above Target* Improvement Ratings, with Performance Index (CPI) gains of 14.2 points in ELA and 20.0 points in mathematics for students in the aggregate. In Cycle III, the school made substantial gains for all of its reported subgroups. These gains included a 15.0-point ELA gain and a 26.1-point math gain for Special Education students, a 14.3-point ELA gain and a 23.7-point math gain for Low Income students, a 19.2-point ELA gain and a 29.8-point math gain for Hispanic students, and a 14.8-point ELA gain and a 12.4-point math gain for White students.

The school had 98% participation on the 2004 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. On the 2004 Grade 4 ELA test, 9% of all students scored in the Advanced category; 18% scored Proficient; 36%, Needs Improvement; and 36%, Failing. On the 2004 Grade 4 math test, 5% scored Advanced; 14% scored Proficient; 41%, Needs Improvement; and 41%, Failing. Of the school's Special Education subgroup, although no students scored in the Advanced or Proficient range in ELA, 10% scored Proficient in math. Of its Limited English Proficient subgroup, 17% scored Advanced and 33% scored Proficient in ELA, while 8% scored Advanced and 17% scored Proficient in math.

PANEL RESPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS

Key Question 1: Is this school using effective improvement initiatives that could be replicated in other similarly profiled schools?

Yes. Answers to sub-questions A through C, presented next, support this response.

A. Which improvement initiatives have had the greatest positive impact on student performance results?

Based on input from school leadership, faculty, parents, the School Council, and students, the panel determined that the improvement initiatives that have had the greatest positive impact on student achievement at Mill Swan Communication Skills Center are as follows:

- ❖ ***Parent outreach through a Family Center with a full-time Family Liaison*** that allows parents to be involved with the school on a daily basis by way of a welcome center and special family room, through daily volunteer activities, through special events, through regular communications from school leadership and staff, and through a dedicated Family Liaison. The Family Center serves teachers and students by mobilizing a cadre of parent volunteers who help with administrative tasks and/or in the classroom, but it also helps parents by providing a link to in-school and community services by way of the Liaison;
- ❖ ***Development of a well-behaved student community through PBIS***, a social-skills program that provides the school with guiding principles for behavior, that provides teachers and students throughout the grades at the school with a common language for social skills and behavior norms, that provides positive reinforcement for good behavior, and that focuses on having students correct their own behavior by focusing on “Better Choices;”
- ❖ ***Integration of Special Education students*** into the life of the school through inclusion in the classrooms of their regular-education peers for Art, Music, and Physical Education lessons, through inclusion at lunch and during recess, and through other planned activities. PBIS’s guiding principles and the existence of the Family Center enhance the school’s ability to operate as a family of learners, with Special Education students a key part of that family; and
- ❖ ***Teacher Roundtables and other cross-grade level, voluntary professional development opportunities***, which center on curricular and pedagogical topics of interest that teachers help to identify, that foster communication among teachers in different grade levels, and that improve practice through group study and staff collaboration.

Parent Outreach—Family Center and Family Liaison

Mill Swan has designated a large, well-equipped room as its Family Center. The room is divided into one section for young children who often play at the school while their parents visit and volunteer, a second section in which parents can gather, and a third section in which parents can speak with a full-time staff member who is employed to help them, in which they can seek out resources, and in which they can undertake volunteer activities. The room is bright and welcoming, coffee and other refreshments are available, and there is no limit to the time parents and members of extended families may spend there during the school day.

This Family Center is home to a full-time Family Liaison who welcomes parents into the Center on a daily basis, mobilizes parent volunteers, answers parents’ questions about the curriculum, and provides outreach by linking families to school, community, and social services. (In the past, when Mill Swan had a preschool, the Family Liaison made home-visits to every family of a preschooler prior to September in order to help families with transitioning to school.) The Liaison, in addition to the school’s Assistant Principal, continues to greet students and their parents each day in the schoolyard, welcoming children to the school and families to the Center to socialize, to ask questions and receive help in solving problems they might have, and to volunteer for the good of the school.

Because of her own dedication and because the Family Center is so inviting, the Family Liaison has gathered and trained a cadre of parents to assist teachers and school leadership in their work to educate children. A core group of six parents is available to photocopy work papers, assist

with classroom activities, and help the school in a variety of other ways. The school must require all family members who volunteer in classrooms to pass background checks. Having submitted to this, parents enter the building ready to serve in a variety of capacities.

Most elementary schools in Worcester have Family Centers, but teachers who have worked in other buildings in the city note that virtually none are used as effectively as Mill Swan's. Because Mill Swan has the largest Special Education population of all schools in the city, the Family Center serves a vital function by allowing parents whose children require physical and occupational support and considerable family care to view the school as an extension of home. Furthermore, because the school serves a high percentage of Low Income, First Language Not English, and Limited English Proficient students, the Family Center meets important needs of a diverse parent population that, in many cases, requires assistance with accessing community assistance and social services, with getting language support, and with learning how to help their children with homework.

Social Skills and Climate Improvement Through PBIS

Mill Swan's implementation of the Positive Behavioral Intervention Support program, or PBIS, provides students throughout the school with guiding principles of, "Be responsible; be respectful; be safe" (Principal Interview, June 2, 2005). The program reinforces positive behavior through the use of a standard reward system: Each class has a jar into which cubes or other types of markers are placed to note positive behavior and to build up to a celebration of that good behavior by way of extra recess time or a similar reward. Although this positive reinforcement system is not unusual, it appears to be very effective at Mill Swan, a high mobility, inner-city school. The principal attributes the success of this program to the fact that it is used in all classes from K to 6 to Special Education and to the way it provides students with concrete examples of positive behavior related to each guiding principle. For example, in the hallway, reminders are posted so that students are aware that being respectful when classes are transitioning means, "Us[ing] quiet voices.... Hold[ing] the door for the person behind you.... Follow[ing] adult instructions" (Teacher-Created PBIS Poster, June 2, 2005). By providing examples of desirable behaviors through posted reminders, through mini-lessons that are taught in the classrooms, and through verbal prompts from teachers and peers, the PBIS program, as implemented by Mill Swan, is effective at building a positive school climate. Students were well behaved during the Compass Candidate Review, teachers were witnessed putting the PBIS system to use, and both students and teachers agreed during Compass Candidate Focus Group discussions that the program has had a positive impact on the school.

Integration of Special Education Students

Mill Swan truly appears to be a family of learners. With the largest Special Education population of any school in Worcester, Mill Swan has had the challenge of integrating students who receive services in special classrooms into the regular life of the school, providing those students with daily opportunities to learn and to socialize with their same-age peers. Because Mill Swan is the district's setting for the Life Skills program, "three classes of students work on Life Skills tasks and the Frameworks at the entry level. Mild to moderate students are serviced

through pull-out literacy groups and inclusion for all other academics” (Programs & Services Report, May 6, 2005). Although the students who participate in the Life Skills program are educated in their own classrooms for the majority of the day, they join their age-mates for recess, lunch, Art, Gym, Music, and special projects. Students who participated in a focus group during the Compass Candidate Review noted that the Special Education students are “really a part of the school... really our friends” (Student Focus Group, June 2, 2005). Because all students receive the same training in PBIS, the social skills program, expectations for good behavior are clear to both regular education and Special Education students at Mill Swan. Students know that they are expected to operate as a family of learners, and doing so seems to have become second nature to them. Also, because the parents of the Special Education students, like those of all students at Mill Swan, are welcome at the school all day, every day, the Mill Swan family extends beyond the students, and Life Skills learners can benefit from having their parents on site whenever necessary. At the time of the Compass Review, one parent was observed participating in her daughter’s physical therapy at the school. The work of the teacher/physical therapist and parent at Mill Swan was highly collaborative, and the parent’s presence in the building was not unusual at all, as parents of all students are welcome to participate in their children’s lives at school at all times.

The school has worked to make the education of the Life Skills students rich, ensuring that they are provided with training in a variety of technologies. The principal noted that, with new assistive technology on the horizon, it is the school’s duty to prepare students for future opportunities by providing them with as broad an education as possible. Despite the school’s need to conserve even the most basic materials, such as paper — the school has reached out to a local business that donates its used paper, and students in all classes write on the backs of sheets — the principal has made sure that the Life Skills students have a full kitchen for cooking projects. This kitchen results in academic and social opportunities for the Special Education students. For example, this year, the students offered three varieties of cheese sandwiches, took orders from teachers for those menu items by tallying choices and keeping lists, took money and made change, prepared the sandwiches, and served them. Many activities such as this are performed with peers from Grades K through 6, and this helps to solidify the school’s family of learners.

Staff Roundtables

Led by the school’s No Child Left Behind Implementation Teacher (NCLBIT), roundtables that are based on curriculum-related or pedagogical topics are attended on a voluntary basis by staff members throughout the school. Four six-week sessions, each based on a different topic, are offered each year and are typically attended by approximately 15 staff members, including Mill Swan teachers, paraprofessionals, and even specialists who work throughout the district, such as the Art Teacher. The NCLBIT, through consideration of the needs of staff members and students, establishes a topic, provides staff members with introductory reading material, and then leads a variety of discussions and lessons based on that topic. Because most of these lessons result in concrete products, teachers who attend the roundtables for ten hours or more receive Professional Development Points for participation; however, this is the only compensation they receive, as the roundtables are voluntary and take place during staff members’ personal time at

lunch and after school. Despite the fact that personal time must be used for participation in these sessions, staff members attend the roundtables with eagerness. In a focus group during the Compass Candidate Review, teachers commented on the fact that these sessions not only expand their knowledge base and improve their practice, but also provide a “professional, collegial opportunity” (Teachers Focus Group, June 2, 2005) for staff members to learn from one another. This collegial work has resulted in the adoption of techniques and programs that help students learn. For example, Special Education staff members who participated in roundtables noted that Four Square, a graphic organizer that is used in teaching writing, had helped their students greatly and would be of potential benefit to all students at the school. With this knowledge, regular education teachers began to use Four Square in their classrooms; at present, Four Square is a key aspect of the writing curriculum at Mill Swan, thanks to collaboration that stemmed from the staff roundtables.

Does the available data support the school’s reported impact in the area intended?

Yes. Mill Swan’s *Above Target* Cycle III improvement ratings for ELA and mathematics, and its gains for reported subgroups including the Special Education students that it is committed to integrating into the regular life of the school, support the school’s contention that the initiatives detailed above have had a positive impact.

B. How did the school plan its improvement initiatives and put them into practice?

Some of the initiatives that have been key to Mill Swan’s improvement were put in place by the district. For example, the Family Center is not specific to Mill Swan; Worcester Public Schools has made an effort to incorporate Family Centers into other schools in the city. However, the amount and quality of the space that Mill Swan dedicated to its Center, the extent of outreach undertaken by the Center’s full-time Family Liaison, the commitment that the principal and other staff members have made to ensuring that the Center is a key part of the school — all of this causes Mill Swan’s implementation of this district initiative to be highly effective. Like the Family Center, the PBIS program is in place in other schools in Worcester. However, it has been embraced by Mill Swan staff, students refer to PBIS lessons when they speak of why the school is safe and comfortable for them, and the principal and teachers enhance the program by frequently adding examples of positive behavior that will help students act in accordance with PBIS’s guiding principles in a variety of situations.

Although the two initiatives mentioned above were put in place by the district, Mill Swan’s other key initiatives were established at the school. The staff roundtables were developed by the principal, who established them to address the school’s need to help Mill Swan’s instructional assistants achieve Highly Qualified status. As word of the roundtables spread throughout the school, teachers asked to participate. Now, the roundtables are a standard part of professional development at Mill Swan, and staff members report that they are key to fostering good communication and improving vertical alignment at a school in which only one class per grade exists and cross-grade collaboration is vital. Just as the roundtables were established at the school to meet a specific need, the Special Education integration initiative is a school-designed initiative. With its large Special Education subgroup, Mill Swan had to determine how best to

serve all students and provide them with both academic and social learning experiences. Knowing that it had supports in place through the positive social training provided by PBIS and through significant parental assistance, the school determined that it could join groups of students together at scheduled points in each day. The initiative emerged from the school's need to serve all students well.

C. Does the school think these initiatives can be successfully used in similar schools? Why?

Yes. Most of the key initiatives that Mill Swan attributes to its progress can be implemented at little or no cost. For example, the roundtables require no extra remuneration to teachers. Teachers commit their personal time to attending sessions that take place before school and during lunch for nothing more than PDPs. Nevertheless, with average roundtable attendance of approximately 15 staff members, the initiative is embraced because teachers have seen how it can inform their practice and improve staff-wide communication about curriculum, teaching, and students. Teachers at other schools would be likely to make a similar commitment if they were able to see improvements in their practice and in school-wide collaboration. Although the Family Center may need to take different forms at different schools due to space and coordination considerations, Mill Swan's parent outreach initiative can serve as a model for similar schools, and some aspects of that initiative can be implemented without monetary expenditure. The school's integration initiative is cost-free.

In general, while some funding enhances each of Mill Swan's improvement efforts and is necessary for purchasing the PBIS curricular program, the key requirement for being able to replicate Mill Swan's initiatives is staff willingness. This willingness develops as staff members witness meaningful improvements that stem from the initiatives.

Key Question 2: Are the conditions in place for this school to serve as a model of effective practices and successful improvement initiatives?

Yes. Answers to the questions that follow support this response.

A. Do leadership and staff have a shared understanding and use a common language to describe the changes/initiatives that have led to improvements in teaching and learning?

Yes. Because the initiatives affect the entire school, virtually all who are involved with Mill Swan talk about them with ease. The school's key initiatives were the focus of discussions with school leadership and staff members. Because Mill Swan is so committed to linking the school with the home, even parents and students presented a unified voice when highlighting improvements and the initiatives that have led to them.

B. How effectively do leadership and staff articulate the connections between the specific changes and improvement initiatives they have implemented, and the gains made in student achievement?

All of the initiatives are implemented to improve school practice, culture, and climate; leadership and staff communicate this effectively. The positive climate that is maintained through PBIS, the collegial discussions about teaching and learning that take place at staff roundtables, the family component that links school to home, and the effective integration of Special Education students into both the academic and social life of the school are tied by leadership and staff to students' performance gains in ELA and mathematics.

C. Is there a school-wide focus on, and sufficient staff investment in, continued improvement of student performance?

Yes. The principal is committed to refining and adding to the school's core initiatives each year so that improvement continues. During the Compass Candidate Review, one teacher commented, "We all feel invested. These are our kids and we want what's best for them" (Teacher Focus Group, June 2, 2005). This comment is supported by action at the school. Staff members invest their personal time to attend roundtables for which the school's NCLBIT researches topics and leads sessions; parents invest time at the school to serve as volunteers; teachers are committed to collaborating with one another to ensure that Special Education students are included in lunch, recess, special subjects, and activities beyond these scheduled times in the day; and the principal guides all of this. The school — a family of learners comprised of leadership, staff members, parents, and students — is committed to sustaining improvement.

D. Does the school appear to have the capacity to host site visits and to participate in various activities to share effective strategies and practices with other schools in the state? Do the school leader and involved staff communicate effectively both orally and in writing how and why the school carried out its strategies for improvement?

Yes. School leadership and staff are eager to share their initiatives with others. The principal, Family Liaison, and NCLBIT are generous with their time and strive to teach visitors as much about the school as possible. Families, especially the core group that volunteers at the school on a regular basis, may also take part in sharing; they would do so with skill, judging from the parent and School Council groups that met with panelists during the Commonwealth Compass Candidate Review.

The principal has included documentation of important school strategies in a staff handbook in which other procedural materials are filed. The material in this handbook could be pared down to focus in on the four key initiatives highlighted in this report; from this, a streamlined document for sharing the initiatives and what has helped to make them effective at Mill Swan would emerge. This document could support observations and discussions that would take place during site visits. Site visits, informed by this streamlined documentation of initiatives, would be of great value to schools that are similar to Mill Swan.

The panel recommends that, if chosen to serve as a 2005 Commonwealth Compass School, Mill Swan ensure that visitors witness all aspects of the work that is done at the Family Center. Consultations take place between parents and the Family Liaison, services are sought out, events are organized, and parents gather informally at different times each day in the Center. If Mill Swan could coordinate the schedule to ensure that visitors see as many of these activities taking place as possible, that would be a benefit to visiting schools.

E. Does the panel recommend that this school be designated to serve as a Commonwealth Compass School?

Yes. The panel recommends that Mill Swan Communication Skills Center be designated to serve as a 2005 Commonwealth Compass School.

CONCLUSION

Mill Swan Communication Skills Center is an effective model for other schools that wish to establish the family component that is so beneficial to making improvements in educating children. Mill Swan's Family Center, its full-time Family Liaison, and its positive behavioral intervention support program all play major roles in building a family of learners at the school. Mill Swan is rich in its ability to provide equitable educational opportunities for all of its students — even those who are in need of very special services. Professional development operates on a bare-boned budget but is effective at improving practice and vertical alignment, with teachers teaching their colleagues through professional roundtables. Mill Swan's positive school culture will be apparent to anyone wishing to model it elsewhere in order to bring into the school the support of the home. For these reasons, the panel believes that Mill Swan would be a valuable member of the Commonwealth Compass Schools Program.

Appendix A Team Members

Eve Laubner, Ed.D., Chair/Writer, School Performance Evaluation, Massachusetts Department of Education

Jennie McGiverin, Assistant Principal, Holyoke Public Schools

Maria Silvestri, Assistant Principal, Ware Public Schools

Appendix B Schedule of Site Visit

7:15 – 8:00 Panelists gathered in Family Center.
8:00 – 8:30 Panelists met with the principal in the Family Center.
8:30 – 9:00 FOCUS GROUPS

Parent Focus Group met with one panelist.
Site Council met with one panelist.
Student Focus Group met with one panelist.

PANELIST A

9:00 – 9:30 Grade 1 (“Foundations”)
9:30 – 10:00 Rm. 10 (Morning Circle & Communication)
Rm. 14 (Walkthrough)

PANELIST B

9:00 – 9:30 Kindergarten (Science)
9:30 – 10:00 Grade 5 (Reading)
Grade 4 (Walkthrough)

PANELIST C

9:00 – 9:30 Grade 3 (Math)
9:30 – 10:00 Grade 6 (Math)

Teacher Interviews

10:00 – 10:30 Each Panelist met with the first teacher who was observed.
10:30 – 11:00 Each Panelist met with the second teacher who was observed.
11:00 – 11:30 Panelists reconvened with the principal to gain additional information.
11:30 – 1:00 Panelists referred to notes, discussed findings, and shared a working lunch.

Teacher Focus Groups

1:00 – 1:30 Focus Groups A and B took place in separate rooms.
1:30 – 2:00 Focus Group C took place after Panelist C received a full tour of the Mill Swan facility.
2:00 – 2:15 Panelists met with the principal for a final interview and to discuss next steps.
2:15 – 5:00 Panelists consolidated notes, deliberated, and formed a conclusion/recommendation.