

Panel Report
Candidate Compass School Review
South Street Elementary School
Fitchburg 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 AYP during the last two years and exceeded their improvement targets for both 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 school, 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 willingness and capacity to serve in the program. Data and information gathered from the application and review processes 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 the South Street Elementary School on May 31, 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

The South Street Elementary School is one of ten schools in Fitchburg and one of six elementary schools. South Street Elementary has a school-wide Title I program which serves 613 students in grades 1 through 4. Enrollment over the past three years has declined from 733 in 2002 to 613 in 2005. Thirty-eight percent of the students are White, 47% are Hispanic, 8% are Asian and 6% are Black. Sixty percent receive free/reduced price lunch, 29% are designated as limited English Proficient (LEP), up from 17% in 2002. English is not the first language (FLNE) for 38% of the students, close to the district average, and consistent at the school over the past few years. Twenty-two percent of the students are currently on Individual Education Plans; this is above the district average of 18% and the state average of 16%.

The daily attendance rate has remained steady between 2001 (94.4%) and 2004 (94.7%), above the 2004 district rate of 92.8% and the state rate of 94.2%. The average number of days absent during 2004 was 8.7%; the district average was 11.7% and the state average was 10.0%. Retentions averaged 6.1% last year, with an average of 8.4% over the past three years, well above the rates for the other elementary schools. In 2004, first grade retentions are double those at the other two elementary schools. The out-of-school suspension rate was up from 3.7 in 2002 to 4.8 in 2004, but below district and state rates. There were no in-school suspensions reported during 2004, way down from 11.5% in 2002.

Staffing

The school administration includes one principal, who has been in his current position at this school for 16 years, one assistant principal, with three years of administrative experience, one of which has been in this school. There are two full-time guidance counselors and two school nurses. There are 16 teacher aides.

Of the 53 teachers, ten have been in the building from one to six years, 22 have been at the school from seven to ten years, and 13 have been teaching in the school from 11 to 15 years. Eight special education teachers are not certified in the area in which they are teaching.

MCAS Results

The school's Cycle II (2001-2002) baseline CPI in English language arts was 70.8 and 50.2 in mathematics. The school did not make Adequate Yearly Progress in the aggregate at the end of Cycle II for ELA or mathematics.

During Cycle III the school received a Performance Rating of High in both English language arts (85.3) and mathematics (80.5) and made Adequate Yearly Progress both in the aggregate and for all reported subgroups. The school also exceeded its NCLB Improvement Targets in both content areas significantly, including a CPI increase of 14.5 in English language arts (target 4.9). In mathematics the school increased its CPI by 30.3, well above its improvement target of 8.3.

Students in each of the reported subgroups showed significant CPI increases: students with limited English proficiency (LEP) increased the CPI by 32.1 in ELA and 45.1 in mathematics; students with special needs increased the CPI in ELA by 15.2 and 24.5 in mathematics; and free/reduced price lunch students increased the CPI by 15.0 in ELA and 29.7 in mathematics. The participation rate for special education students was 100% in the past two years.

MCAS Overview

Students at the South Street Elementary School are assessed in grades 3 and 4 in English language arts (ELA) and in grade 4 in mathematics. In the school's Cycle III End-of-Cycle AYP Report (2003-2004), the school made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in the aggregate for both ELA and mathematics in 2003 and 2004. The school also made AYP in ELA for each of its reported subgroups: Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Free/Reduced Price Lunch, Hispanic students, and White students. It made AYP in mathematics for its reported subgroups of Free/Reduced Price Lunch, Hispanic students, and White students.¹

Substantial increases in the CPI for each subgroup were achieved in both subject areas, contributing to the overall increases in the Composite Proficiency Index (CPI) of 14.5 in ELA and 30.3 in mathematics.

Student Performance in English Language Arts

In Cycle III, South Street Elementary School received a performance rating of High for its Composite Proficiency Index (CPI) of 85.3 in ELA. Its 14.5-point improvement over its Cycle II (2001-2002) CPI of 70.8 was rated *Above Target*. Participation rates in the ELA test in Cycle III were 100 percent. At the district level, a Cycle III Performance Rating of Moderate was achieved in ELA.

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).

Grade 3 Reading

The 55% of third graders scoring in Proficient rose to 62% by 2004, while the 7% of students scoring in the Warning level decreased to 6% in 2004 for all students. For special education students, the Proficient rate rose from 25% in 2001 to 30% in 2004, with a limited drop in the Warning rates from 25% to 23%. Limited English Proficient students' rate of Proficient scores declined over this same four-year period, from 63% to 36%. During the same period, Warning rates for Limited English Proficient students decreased from 25% to 4%.

Grade 4

Students tested at fourth grade showed significant increases in scores, both decreasing Warning rates from 23% to 11% from 2001-2004, and raising the 21% Proficient in 2001 to 51% Proficient and 7% Advanced in ELA in 2004. During that same period, students scoring in Needs Improvement declined from 57% to 30%.

Student Performance in Mathematics

In Cycle III, South Street Elementary School received a performance rating of High for its aggregate Performance Index (CPI) of 80.5. For its 30.3-point increase over Cycle II (2001-2002) CPI of 50.2, the school received an improvement rating of Above Target. The school's participation rates in the mathematics portion of the MCAS test in Cycle III were 100% in 2003 and 99% in 2004.

Grade 4

In 2001, 8% of all students performed at the Proficient level, 2% were at Advanced, 46% were at Needs Improvement, and 44% at Warning. By 2004, 39% scored at Proficient, 16% in Advanced, 34% in Needs Improvement, and 11% Warning. For students with special needs, the Warning rate decreased from 57% in 2001 to 41% in 2004, while the percentage of students scoring at Proficient or above rose from 4% to 30%.

In both ELA and mathematics, South Street students continue to surpass both the district and the state, with significantly lower numbers of students at South Street scoring at the Warning level. The number of students reaching Proficient or above levels continues to rise.

Panel Responses to the Key Questions

KEY QUESTION 1: Is this school using effective improvement initiatives that could be adapted in other similarly profiled schools?

Yes. The Panel Review Team concluded that the South Street Elementary School has implemented effective improvement initiatives that could be replicated in similarly profiled schools. These include:

- Teacher initiated, directed, and sustained improvement planning that calls for considerable commitment of time but does not require additional support.

- Implementation of a three-tiered school improvement plan that uses student achievement data to develop learning goals, detailed curriculum maps and instructional change objectives.
- Horizontal and vertical grade-level curriculum and instructional compatibility.
- The alignment of school and state standards and expectations.

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

The climate and culture of the school contributed to the changes in MCAS test performance between 2001 and 2004. Administrators set a positive culture of devolved responsibility at the school. They encouraged individual initiative and leadership. Teachers responded by accepting responsibility for bringing about improvement in student performance.

In particular, teachers took responsibility for establishing horizontal grade-level and vertical grade K-4 teams. These teams became a significant factor in bringing about improved student performance results in four ways – as initiators, as primary developers, as implementers, and as evaluators. These teams impacted meaningfully upon student performance results.

Secondly, professional development focused on tasks related to improving students’ math and ELA test results. Assessment of student writing, utilization of rubrics, building portfolios, and differentiating instruction are examples of topics that have been addressed during professional development.

Thirdly, the curriculum mapping process used for math and ELA composition facilitated the implementation of the essential learning goals established as part of the improvement plan. Examples of instructional strategies adopted as an outcome of the curriculum mapping include the Four-Square Writing Program, the Singapore Math Pilot Program, the Literacy Program (which encompasses Guided Reading and Writing, math word walls, and small group instruction), modeled instruction, and the Homework Club.

Fourthly, increased instructional time for math, composition, and literacy has impacted on student performance positively. One and one-half hour literacy time blocks have also been in place for the past three years. For the past two years, one-hour sustained writing and math blocks and an after-school Homework Club (which focuses on MCAS practice) have been in place. Another version of the Homework Club was established where students who have not completed weekly homework assignments meet with the principal or assistant principal. The purpose of the club is to keep students on task with their homework.

Finally, extensive formative and summative evaluations are conducted routinely at the school to monitor student work. Portfolio assessments, benchmark assessments, rubric-based writing assessments, and quarterly tests illustrate ways in which faculty augment MCAS tests.

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

Students' poor MCAS test performance in 2001 and faculty recognition that the school's curriculum was not aligned with state standards served as a "wake-up call" for the faculty and staff of SSES. At a school-wide meeting in the spring of 2001, the building principal shared his belief that the school could do much better. Faculty members agreed and decided to assume collaborative responsibility for improving students' assessment performance. During the 2001-2002 school year, guided by the principal, the faculty initiated a three-tiered school improvement plan, which resulted in CPI scores that exceeded district and state scores by 2005.

Tier One

Teachers' weekly common planning time became the workplace for horizontal grade-level teams as well as for vertical grade K-4 teams. Both teams set out to examine previous MCAS test and other assessment results to ascertain students' strengths and deficiencies, and to examine relationships between the school's curriculum and the state standards in math and ELA. Members of these teams learned to make use of data for decision-making purposes. By the end of the 2001-2002 school year, essential learning goals were drawn up.

Tier Two

In order to monitor implementation of the essential learning goals, team members developed math and ELA composition curriculum maps during the 2002-2003 school year. These maps made possible the establishment of clear student expectations at each grade level and uniform expectations for students across classrooms. Achievement of the essential learning goals was also enabled through the use of the curriculum maps.

A portfolio system for math and ELA composition was developed as well. The portfolios contained specific benchmark assessments, samples of student math and composition work, and other data. Teacher team members utilized the portfolio contents to fine-tune their curriculum maps and instructional strategies. The teams also designed a student folder system to accumulate homework and MCAS practice test results.

Tier Three

In-service time as well as the weekly common planning time continued to be used to modify the curriculum maps and instructional strategies. During Tier Three, rubrics were developed to score student composition activity, teachers introduced flexible math subgroups in an effort to accelerate learning, and teachers' data analysis skills continued to grow. A data-driven curriculum and instructional change process became well established during the 2003-2004 school year. School leaders provided various forms of data for use by the teacher teams. Administrators and other staff helped teachers make this data user-friendly for themselves, their students, and the students' parents and guardians.

The three-tiered school improvement plan is data driven. Various formative and summative assessments inform decision-making. Benchmarks and rubrics enable teachers to relate the school program to state standards. A “drill-skill development – continual reinforcement” instructional process illuminates strengths and deficiencies. Re-teaching occurs weekly as deficiencies and gaps are identified.

Throughout this methodical, teacher driven three-year change process, building administrators supported the teacher teams consistently, and support staff and specialty teachers became partners with the teams of teachers. Central office administrators also offered encouragement and support. By 2004-2005, the essential learning goals had become an integral part of classroom instruction, all teachers possessed the math and composition curriculum maps, student portfolios became an integral part of classroom work, and a number of new curriculum and instruction practices were in place.

C. What are the next steps for sustaining, expanding, or refining the program/practice?

Teachers interviewed said the math and composition curriculum maps merit re-examination to be certain they continue to be compatible with the MCAS tests and the state standards. Faculty also recognized weaknesses in other areas of ELA such as non-fiction literature and poetry. A teacher team will be established during 2005-2006 to construct a curriculum map that encompasses these areas of ELA.

Teachers of art, music, health, physical education, and library have met monthly for the past two years to realign their curricula to be more compatible with math and writing expectations in grades K-4. Some members have completed curriculum maps that support each grade’s math and composition curricula. More work in these areas is planned for 2005-2006.

Special Education teachers raised MCAS test expectations for their students several years ago. On the one hand, these students have performed better on the tests than their district and state counterparts. On the other hand, these students have not performed as well as other student subgroups at SSES on the tests. Teachers have identified reasons for this test performance gap and plan to address them next school year.

Perhaps the most challenging next step to be addressed by the staff relates to the expectations now held by teachers and students at the school. Student expectations have risen as an outcome of their class work and the MCAS test confirms of their efforts. High expectations are being fulfilled but teachers will have to decide whether their expectations for students are high enough.

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

Yes. Administrators and faculty agree that the initiatives at the South Street Elementary School can be replicated successfully in similar schools. The supportive learning community at the school has been built and sustained through well-planned and well-documented structures and procedures that could be adapted to meet the needs of a variety of schools. The alignment of

standards and expectations, the collaborative work of the teams, and the use of student performance data in that work could be shared and reproduced by educators in other schools. Teachers at schools wanting to adopt these initiatives will, however, need to be committed to labor-intensive tasks.

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

Yes. The Panel Review Team concluded that conditions are in place for the South Street Elementary School to serve as a model of effective practices and successful improvement initiatives. The leadership and staff collaborated in school-wide, teacher-driven planning for improving student learning and teacher capabilities.

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. After interviewing two administrators, eight teachers individually, and 45 teachers and counselors in seven focus groups, the team found consistent collegiality; the horizontal and vertical grade-level teacher teams, along with the administration, share common aspirations for improving student achievement. They also use assessment data regularly to modify the school's curriculum and instruction, and to raise students' performance. Administrators and faculty are able to articulate clearly the strategies and tactics employed during the past three years that have led to improvements in teaching and learning. Data and information are shared formally during scheduled weekly and monthly meetings and informally among individuals almost constantly.

The team noted a consistent relationship between the data and information referred to during interviews and the instructional practices observed in eight classrooms. Curriculum standards and instructional goals were displayed, student portfolios were stored in a visible area, examples of instructional modifications such as the Four-Square writing program and the Singapore math program were observed, and instructional differentiation was seen. All the teachers observed demonstrated effective classroom management as well as positive relationships with students.

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?

The administration, faculty, and staff clearly identify and articulate connections between specific changes and improvement initiatives implemented and student achievement improvements. Those interviewed were able to discuss the three-tiered school improvement plan, to highlight classroom applications that were outcomes of the planning, and to describe the effects of curriculum and instructional modification on performance improvement. Many of the teachers have used outcomes of the three-tiered school improvement plan for up to three years and they are able to describe their work comfortably and confidently, as they did with members of the Panel Review Team.

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

The concept of continuous improvement is embedded in the daily implementation of the school's three-tiered school improvement plan. Constant discussion about student performance translates into continual review and modification of practices and programs in place. The school administrators encourage teachers to take initiative and adopt radical, well-tried solutions to address student performance gaps. Administrators support teacher initiative with financial and other resources wherever possible. The Singapore math program pilot test, which is currently under way, is an example of such a teacher-initiated program.

The Instructional Leadership Team and the grade level teams, impacted by student performance data from formative and summative assessments, plan to revisit the math and ELA composition curriculum maps during the next school year. MCAS tests revealed weaknesses in student performance in other areas of ELA such as non-fiction literature and poetry. A teacher team is planning to construct a curriculum map that encompasses these areas of ELA during 2005-2006. Teachers of art, music, health, physical education, and library plan to continue their curriculum realignment work through the next school year. Current commitments to a literacy collaborative model and the building-based literacy coordinators are set to continue. These coordinators provide training on a regular basis in Guided Reading and Writing instructional strategies, small-group instruction, and math word wall utilization. Finally, problems have been identified in the school's special education program, which the staff expects to address in the next school year.

Teachers interviewed felt that an effective curriculum and instructional model had been constructed and they showed commitment to sustaining its implementation and development. One practice described by the teachers relates directly to this question, and could be adopted to good advantage in other schools: grade-level teams review instruction in the context of student assessments every two weeks and then modify the instruction accordingly to meet the students' needs identified. This on-going process reflects the staff investment in continued improvement of student performance.

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? Does the school leader and involved staff communicate effectively both orally and in writing how and why it carried out its strategies for improvement?

Yes. The school's programs and practices are fulfilling expectations, administrators and teachers are proud of their accomplishments, and the change initiatives appear to have raised student self-esteem. Extensive documentation exists about the school's turn-around, which could be packaged and shared with visitors.

There are a number of faculty and staff capable of sharing effective strategies and practices with other schools in the state. During the site visit, administrators, faculty and other staff demonstrated the capability to host personnel from visiting schools.

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

Yes. The principal and staff impressed panel members with their enthusiasm and ability to communicate effectively how and why they carried out the three-tiered plan and selected strategies to raise levels of achievement at the school. The Panel Review Team recommends that the South Street Elementary School be designated as a Commonwealth Compass School.

Appendix A Panel Members

William C. Wolf, Jr., Chair/Writer, Class Measures Limited

Willette Johnson, Springfield Public Schools

Steven C. Leonard, Olde Boston Associates

Judy Siciliano, Conway Public Schools

Appendix B Candidate Compass School Panel Review Schedule

All activities took place at the school.

7:15 – 8:00 a.m. Panel met to prepare for the day.

8:00 – 8:30 a.m. Panelists met with the Principal, Assistant Principal, Curriculum Consultant, Superintendent, and a School Counselor.

8:30 – 9:00 a.m. Panelists met with four focus groups.

Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D
Title I Teachers	Parent Focus Group	Compass School Team	Specialists

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

	Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D
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.
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.

11:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. Panelists met to discuss findings so far and to plan the remainder of the day (working lunch).

12:30 – 1:00 p.m. Panelists used time as needed to analyze findings and to gather more information, including follow-up questions for the Principal or other staff members.

1:00 – 2:00 p.m. Panelists met with teachers in focus groups.*

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

2:00 – 2:30 p.m. Chair and panelists met briefly with the Principal, Assistant Principal, and Curriculum Consultant, and then organized and collated notes from focus groups.

2:30 – 5:00 p.m. Panelists deliberated, documented evidence, and formed conclusions/recommendations.