

School Panel Review Report Mary E. Curley Middle School Boston 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 schools' Adequate Yearly Progress targets in English language arts or mathematics or both. The Mary E. Curley Middle School met this criterion and was one of five Boston schools selected for panel review in winter 2005. The panel review was conducted on February 7 and 8, 2006.

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. Is the school implementing a sound plan for improvement and what gains have been achieved to date as a result of this implementation?
2. Do the conditions appear to be in place for successful implementation of the school's improvement plan?

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, together with school performance data, will be forwarded to the Commissioner of Education for consideration in determining whether the Mary E. Curley 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.

Mary E. Curley Middle School Profile

Enrollment

The Mary E. Curley Middle School (Curley Middle) serves students in grades 6 through 8. Enrollment at Curley Middle has decreased from 791 students in 2002 to 669 students in 2005. The school's various subgroup populations have remained fairly stable over the past four years. In 2005, the Hispanic subgroup represented 61 percent of the total population – an increase of two percent since 2002. The percentage of Limited English Proficient students has decreased from 38 percent in 2002 to 15 percent in 2005, while the school's Low Income population has increased from 73 percent in 2002 to 81 percent in 2005. Proportions of Curley Middle student subgroups in 2005, as compared to district and state averages, are presented below:

<i>Subgroup</i>	2005 Enrollment (%)		
	School	District	State
Asian	1	9	5
Black	33	46	9
Hispanic	61	31	12
Native American	0	0.4	0.3
White	6	14	74
Low-Income	81	74	28
First Language Not English	52	37	14
Limited English Proficient	15	17	5
Special Education	16	20	16

In 2005, the attendance rate at Curley Middle was 91.3 percent, with students absent 12.8 days on average. This rate is equivalent to the Boston district rate, and approximately three percentage points below the state average of 94.4 percent. The school’s retention rate was 5.4 percent in 2004, the last year for which these data are available. Curley Middle reported no in-school suspensions in 2005, while out-of-school suspensions averaged 20.6 percent, up from 3.5 percent in 2002. Averages in 2005 for the state were 4.5 percent for in-school suspensions, 6.1 percent for out-of-school suspensions and in 2004, 2.6 percent for retentions.

Staffing

The 2005-2006 Curley Middle staffing report indicates that the school is comprised of 2 administrators, 47 teachers, 3 guidance counselors, 6 para-professionals, and 8 other staff. The principal’s five years of administrative experience have all been at the Curley Middle School. Of the teachers, approximately 45 percent have been at the school for three or fewer years, and 21 percent have been at the school for 10 or more years. Eighty-six percent of teachers in core subject areas are reported as highly qualified. More than two-thirds of the teaching staff holds an advanced degree.

MCAS Overview

Students at the Curley Middle are assessed in grade 7 in English language arts (ELA) and in grades 6 and 8 in mathematics. Curley Middle’s Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report for 2005 Mid-Cycle IV shows the school Identified for Improvement—Subgroups Only for English language arts and Corrective Action for mathematics. In 2005, the school failed to make AYP for students in the aggregate and all four of the school’s reported subgroups in ELA.¹ The school failed to make AYP in mathematics in 2005 for students in the aggregate and for all five of the school’s reported subgroups. In 2004, the school failed to make AYP for the Low Income and

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, Low-Income, African-American/Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native American and White. A minimum of 40 students per subgroup (or 5% of the total number of students assessed, whichever is greater) is required to issue a statistically sound rating or determination of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Four subgroups met the minimum sample size at Mary E. Curley Middle School in 2005 in ELA: Limited English Proficient, Low Income, African-American/Black, and Hispanic. Five subgroups met the minimum sample size in 2005 in mathematics: Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Low Income, African-American/Black, and Hispanic.

African-American/Black subgroups in ELA; in mathematics, all groups but the Limited English Proficient (LEP) and Hispanic subgroups failed to make AYP.

In 2005, the aggregate Composite Performance Indices (CPIs) for the Curley Middle School were 65.2 in ELA and 45.1 in mathematics. Year-by-year aggregate CPIs are shown below:

Year-by-Year Aggregate CPI Data Summary		
Year	ELA	Math
2001	54.4	32.8
2002	58.2	36.8
2003	59.4	43.6
2004	63.7	42.9
2005	65.2	45.1
State Target 2005	80.5	68.7

GRADE SIX

Mathematics MCAS Results

Results of the 2005 Grade 6 Mathematics MCAS for students at Curley Middle are presented below:

2005 Mathematics, Gr. 6	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W
Aggregate	4	14	30	52
Regular Education	5	17	37	41
Special Education	0	0	7	93
Limited English Proficient	NA	NA	NA	NA

Student performance in grade 6 mathematics has remained poor since 2001, with more than half of the students tested continuing to score in the Warning performance level:

Aggregate Results Mathematics, Gr. 6	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W
2005	4	14	30	52
2004	7	11	29	53
2003	6	14	27	54
2002	7	10	13	70
2001	2	8	16	74

The percentage of students scoring in the Advanced and Proficient performance levels ranges from a low of 10 (2001) to a high of 20 (2003). In 2005, 52 percent of the 221 students assessed scored in the Warning performance level. In 2002 and 2001, 70 percent or more of students scored in Warning.

Performance results for special education and LEP students in grade 6 mathematics indicate significantly higher rates in the Warning category than for regular education students. In 2005, 93 percent of the 51 special education students scored in the Warning category. In 2004, the last

year in which the LEP population was large enough to calculate percentages in mathematics, 68 percent of the 19 LEP students assessed scored in the Warning category. The performance of special education and LEP students has remained very low since 2001.

GRADE SEVEN

English Language Arts (ELA) MCAS Results

Results of the 2005 Grade 7 ELA MCAS for students at Curley Middle are presented below:

2005 ELA, Gr. 7	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W
Aggregate	0	27	52	21
Regular Education	0	35	56	9
Special Education	0	0	56	44
Limited English Proficient	0	7	31	62

Student performance in grade 7 ELA slightly improved from 2001 to 2003 and has remained fairly stable since 2003, as reflected in the aggregate MCAS data presented below:

Aggregate Results ELA, Gr. 7	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W
2005	0	27	52	21
2004	0	23	55	22
2003	0	24	51	25
2002	0	23	45	32
2001	0	13	45	43

No students have scored in the Advanced performance level. The percentages of students scoring in the Proficient performance level range from a low of 13 percent (2001) to a high of 27 percent (2005). The percentage of students scoring in the Warning performance level in 2005 was 21 percent, down from 25 percent in 2003 and from 43 percent in 2001. The populations assessed have ranged from approximately 200 to 250 students per year.

Performance results for special education and LEP students in grade 7 ELA indicate higher rates in the Warning category than for regular education students. In 2005, 44 percent of the 27 special education students and 62 percent of the 29 LEP students assessed scored in the Warning category. The performance of special education students has generally improved from 2002 and 2005, with the exception of 2004. The performance of LEP students has remained stable between 2004 and 2005.

GRADE EIGHT

Mathematics MCAS Results

Results of the 2005 Grade 8 Mathematics MCAS for students at Curley Middle are presented below:

2005 Mathematics, Gr. 8	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W
Aggregate	1	9	32	58
Regular Education	1	11	41	48
Special Education	0	4	7	89
Limited English Proficient	0	0	10	90

Student performance in grade 8 mathematics has remained poor since 2001, with more than half of the students tested continuing to score in the Warning performance level:

Aggregate Results Mathematics, Gr. 8	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W
2005	1	9	32	58
2004	0	9	27	63
2003	1	4	32	63
2002	0	2	24	74
2001	0	2	21	77

The percentage of students scoring in the Advanced and Proficient performance levels ranges from a low of two percent (2001 and 2002) to a high of 10 percent (2005). In 2005, 58 percent of the 197 students assessed scored in the Warning performance level. Between 2001 and 2004, more than 60 percent of students scored in Warning.

Performance results for special education and LEP students in grade 8 mathematics indicate significantly higher rates in the Warning category than for regular education students. In 2005, 89 percent of the 28 special education students and 90 percent of the 21 LEP students assessed scored in the Warning category. The performance of special education and LEP students has remained very low since 2001.

PANEL RESPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS

KEY QUESTION 1: IS THE SCHOOL IMPLEMENTING A SOUND PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENT AND WHAT GAINS HAVE BEEN ACHIEVED TO DATE AS A RESULT OF THIS IMPLEMENTATION?

It is the judgment of the Panel Review (PR) team that the Curley Middle School is not currently implementing a sound plan for improvement. Although elements of a sound plan are evident in the current Curley Middle Whole School Improvement Plan (WSIP), the level of coherence between individual elements of the plan is insufficient. Although causes of students' low performance are appropriately attributed to what teachers are not currently doing well enough, the plan does not provide sufficient evidence that the problems causing these shortcomings have been identified. There are inconsistencies between the root causes as written in the WSIP and answers articulated by staff in interviews and a staff survey. The school has uncovered numerous student weaknesses through analysis of assessment results, but it is unclear how these weaknesses were prioritized and how they relate to root causes stated in the plan.

The Curley Middle School is implementing numerous strategies that are identified in the WSIP and may in time lead to improvement. The PR team heard anecdotal reports of changes in student performance and in teacher practice as a result of initiatives in the WSIP, but because many of the plan's benchmarks are unclear and immeasurable, the team was unable to assess gains relative to the WSIP. The school is currently collecting formative assessment data, which should help the school monitor whether the strategies listed in their plan are leading to improvement.

A. Are the school's written improvement planning documents (including action plans) clear and specific enough to guide the implementation of planned improvement initiatives?

Schools under review in Boston submitted Whole School Improvement Plans (WSIPs) in October 2005 in preparation for School Panel Reviews scheduled in February 2006. Teams of three Department staff members reviewed the written plans and completed summary assessments of their soundness, based on a Department rubric with specific indicators for five central components: overall clarity and coherence of the plan; identifying and prioritizing problems (based on multiple sources of data); analyzing the causes of weakness in student performance; establishing improvement objectives and selecting strategies; and establishing benchmarks for implementation and outcomes. The judgment on the soundness of these written document(s) provided in the summary rubric is based solely on a close reading of the written documents submitted and is not a final determination. The Panels used the summary rubric to inform their discussion of the written plan that each panelist had reviewed individually prior to the review, and to help focus their time in the school on finding evidence of implementation of the planned strategies. Final judgment of the soundness of the school's plan – and the Panel's overall response to Key Question 1 in the Panel Review protocol – depended on further information about the development of the plan and evidence of the plan's implementation gathered by the Panel during on-site interviews, focus groups and observations.

It is the judgment of the PR team that the Curley School's written improvement documents are not clear and specific enough to guide the implementation of planned improvement initiatives. The school has reviewed and identified weaknesses in student performance from the MCAS and formative assessments. However, there is not a clear link between identified student weaknesses and the selection of student learning objectives. The school has articulated causes related to teacher practice that are within its control. However, the plan does not provide sufficient evidence to link these identified causes with reasons for low student performance and fails to prioritize strategies that are most likely to have the greatest impact on improvement efforts. Further, the WSIP does not contain measurable benchmarks and timelines to assess implementation.

The Curley has conducted analysis of both formative assessment information and student performance on the MCAS. Analysis included, for example, areas in which students at the Curley Middle School performed comparably to other students in the state, and also identified areas in which the greatest gaps existed. However, a review of in the WSIP by both the PR team and the DOE team of reviewers, found only partial alignment between identified areas of weakness and Student Learning Objectives (SLOs). Furthermore, there is not a clear explanation for why SLOs were chosen as a priority focus for improvement. For example, three or more of five SLOs for mathematics do not appear to directly correlate with the student weaknesses identified in the assessment summary.

Causes stated in the Curley WSIP identify deficiencies in teaching practices at the school. For example, *"Teachers have not effectively taught the purposes of the order of operations."* However, there is not a logical connection between these causes and the weaknesses identified during analyses of student performance. Why have teachers not taught the purposes of the order of operations? Is there a lack of instructional time? Are teachers not proficient in the content? And further, if order of operations is taught, which areas of student weakness will be improved upon and therefore, lead to increases in performance?

Though strategies in the WSIP generally align with the causes, because the relationship between the identified causes and weaknesses in student performance are unclear, the impact stated strategies will have on improvement efforts is ambiguous. In addition each action plan contains multiple steps that need to be taken to implement strategies effectively. Neither the PR team nor the team of DOE reviewers could identify which of the stated strategies were improvement priorities. Interviews and focus groups with Curley staff indicated similar confusion. As stated by one teacher, "I look at the list of strategies and choose the one that seems most appropriate for the lesson." As a result, instructional changes cited in the WSIP may or may not be consistently addressing areas in which students require the greatest attention.

The Curley WSIP contains various action plans to target specific subgroups. However, there is no indication why action plans differ for different groups, since data and causal analyses do not appear to differentiate between the needs of the school's subgroups. Action plans in mathematics for example, do not target language specific goals and strategies for limited English proficient students. The PR team and the DOE team of reviewers identified little overlap between strategies in the different action plans; but the groups change – in one case, from 'All students' to 'African American/Low Income students.'

Finally, the Curley Middle School WSIP lacks clear benchmarks and timelines to monitor and assess gains in relation to the plan implementation. See Key Question 1D for further discussion.

In summary, because the Curley Middle School WSIP does not provide sufficient evidence to logically connect identified causes with student performance weaknesses, and action plans and related strategies are not clearly prioritized to address areas where improvement is needed most, it is the judgment of the PR team that the WSIP is insufficient to guide the implementation of planned improvement initiatives at the Curley Middle School.

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

The Curley Middle School WSIP was developed through a process that could potentially support its successful implementation. A large and representative group contributed to the creation of the 2005-07 WSIP through identification of student weaknesses. The process used to develop associated and prioritized improvement strategies, however, remains vague in the written plan. Stakeholders interviewed by the PR team have been informed of the goals for school improvement.

The 2005-07 Curley WSIP was developed with the involvement of a large and diverse group of school stakeholders. As the plan was developed, the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) served as the vehicle for communicating information among the staff, the School Site Council (SSC) and administrators. The ILT, with participation of the school's mathematics facilitators, identified student weaknesses through data analysis. The ILT established that some areas of weakness were more pressing than others and easier to address. The principal reported that there was a lot of give and take between staff and facilitators in the development of the WSIP. Most staff members agreed with this statement during interviews conducted by the PR team. As reported by staff, mathematics facilitators and the principal, content area meeting time was devoted to the creation of the plan. Feedback from these meetings was part of the WSIP planning process.

Although school leaders and staff report ongoing collaboration in the identification of student learning weaknesses and identified causes, it was not clearly articulated to the PR team how action plans and related strategies were constructed or prioritized. During interviews with the PR team, teachers stated various strategies under implementation but could not articulate which of these strategies were of greatest importance. Curley Middle staff and the principal indicated their expectation that teachers will implement all of the WSIP strategies at some point in time.

In an effort to make the WSIP more user-friendly, the essential content was summarized into single-page summary sheets developed for both mathematics and ELA. Staff members report that these summary sheets have proved a very useful tool; enabling teachers to more easily identify teaching strategies and, therefore, follow through on the implementation of the plan.

All stakeholders interviewed stated their knowledge of the School Improvement Plan having been communicated to them. While parents were not as familiar as others regarding the content of the plan, opportunities to become more aware of the plan's contents had clearly been offered. Several members of the School Site Council were new and were less familiar with the planning process than others. Half of the Council's members were not present at the time of WSIP development.

It is the judgment of the PR Team that the process for developing the WSIP at Curley Middle currently has potential for supporting full implementation, once greater coherence of the parts of

the plan are in place. The staff is committed to student improvement but the large number and lack of prioritized strategies in the WSIP make consistent and successful implementation of the initiatives difficult.

C. To what extent is the school's staff actually implementing the plan?

The PR team found abundant evidence of efforts on the part of the staff to implement the WSIP. The Curley Middle School faculty and staff understand their roles and responsibilities associated with implementing most elements of the 2005-07 WSIP. Despite concerns that staff members are implementing many initiatives with little gains in student performance, school leaders and teachers continue to put forth considerable effort to meet the plan's goals for student improvement. Staff members report that their use of the summary document on a daily basis has better informed their practices in implementing the plan.

Staff of the Curley Middle School demonstrated a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities for implementing actions in the WSIP. A majority of teachers interviewed across grade level and content areas reported a solid understanding of their role in implementing the plan and expressed a strong sense of responsibility to meet the goals outlined in the WSIP. On the *Department of Education (DOE) Instructional Staff Survey*, 82% of staff either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, "I am well-informed about the initiatives that are undertaken by our school leadership to improve student performance." One of the school's newer teachers reported she had been given the WSIP, had read it and was familiar with how to implement the plan. Most teachers reported that the WSIP informs their instruction.

For both ELA and mathematics, goals of the WSIP are an important part of teacher planning. Discussion of implementation of the WSIP is built into weekly staff meetings. Interviews with Curley Middle teachers, coaches, the ILT and the principal all reported that this was a dominant part of practice at the school. Review of meeting minutes by the PR team corroborated these reports. In particular, the summary documents are helpful to the staff. As stated by one teacher, "During every planning meeting, we refer to the summary pages to select specific strategies to incorporate into each unit of study or lesson." Coaches and facilitators reported the requirements of the curriculum (Readers and Writers Workshop models, the America's Choice reading program and the Connected Mathematics Program (CMP)) are what drive the choice of strategies.

The PR team observed lessons in which WSIP strategies were utilized. "Before Class Work," a strategy listed in the WSIP, was observed in most classes. Language objectives and learning objectives were posted in most classrooms visited. Several teachers referred to these objectives during classroom observation by team members. Kinesthetic strategies were demonstrated in regular education classroom to teach mathematics concepts related to fractions.

Mathematics staff members are concerned that their implementation of the WSIP faces significant limitation. In the past the Curley Middle School had two part time mathematics coaches who provided in-class coaching to all math teachers. Currently, with mathematics coaching time reduced to two days a week, the in-class coaching is available to facilitators only. The coach leads content-area meetings and provides after-school professional development. While teachers and administrators reported that dialogue among teachers and the coach and teachers and facilitators have been of clear benefit, no in-class coaching is available for teachers because the facilitators teach full-time.

As a result of the WSIP strategy that special education and regular education teachers will collaborate more frequently, there has been a change in how these faculty members work together. One staff member reported there has been, “A massive change to our schedule so regular education teachers can meet with special education staff.” A reported outcome is that teachers can now share various instructional strategies that have been effective. Additionally, the staff is beginning to observe each others’ classrooms – another strategy stated in the WSIP. Not only do teachers report this collaboration between regular and special education staff but, as well, collaboration across grade-level classrooms.

Substantial effort is being made to provide professional development (PD) opportunities that are linked to the goals and objectives outlined in the WSIP and to support its implementation. Coaches and teachers report many methods through which they implement the plan during content-level meetings and after-school PD for both ELA and mathematics. In order to support improvement initiatives, the school provides common planning time. Staff reports using common planning time to develop methods to better address the needs of the students. Practices such as Looking at Student Work (LASW), comparisons of data gathered from such assessments, use of student notebooks to track student progress and planning around strategies are conducted during common planning time. Use of regular common planning time is reflected in the *DOE Instructional Staff Survey* in which 70% of teachers report meeting with other staff members at least once per week to discuss student work and 78% to plan/coordinate lessons and instruction. In interviews with the PR team, some teachers report up to three hours per week of common planning time. The literacy coach meets with all ELA teachers once per week for an hour, including special education and Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) teachers. The new language acquisition coach recently reassigned to the school works primarily with content teachers to make content more accessible to English language learners.

Grants obtained by the school continue to support professional development opportunities surrounding the school curricula. This includes a three-year Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) grant that provides stipends to staff to attend trainings to support CMP implementation. As the school is currently piloting *America’s Choice* to complement the already established workshop models and Ramp-Up, there has been corresponding professional development to train staff. Most of the teachers interviewed reported that the professional development offered by the school meets their needs well. Curley Middle School PD has been clearly planned and conducted in direct connection with the aim of addressing goals and objectives in the WSIP.

There is a wide array of evidence to indicate that the staff of Curley Middle is working hard to implement their WSIP. School-wide, personnel understand the expectation to meet the goals stated in the WSIP. They provided evidence that their planning and work is informed by the plan and recent addendum. However, the lack of a logical connection between WSIP strategies and student performance weaknesses brings into question the actual impact implementation will have on improvement efforts.

D. What gains, if any, have been achieved relative to SIP goals or benchmarks, through implementation of the plan?

To date, Curley Middle has not achieved the necessary gains as a result of WSIP implementation. The WSIP contains various benchmarks, however, many of the benchmarks are unclear or immeasurable and are, therefore, not useful in assessing gains relative to the WSIP. Although staff and school leaders reported anecdotal improvements in student performance,

MCAS and other test scores do not yet demonstrate this improvement. While staff report that the school is “moving in the right direction” toward student improvement, they admit that measurable gains are few.

Curley Middle is utilizing formative assessments, in addition to MCAS results, to provide additional information on student performance. New forms of assessment begun in the 2005-06 school year include RISO (math assessment software) and the Formative Assessment of Students' Thinking in Reading (FAST-R). Staff and leadership reported the following gains on formative assessments.

Mathematics facilitators expressed confidence that, due to the similarity in types of questions, information provided by the RISO assessment software will lead students to better results with MCAS. ELA teachers report that, using FAST-R data, intensive use of data analysis has led to student performance improvements. Staff reported, for example, that students are answering all multiple-choice and open-response questions, whereas in the past, answers were left unfinished. Student answers on open-ended questions are more detailed and demonstrate that higher-level thinking is going into student writing. One staff member reported, “FAST-R breaks down the data and provides us with evidence that the numbers of correct answers around inferencing is steadily improving.” Student scores on questions demonstrating the ability to understand the text and find support within the text are also improving. A long composition rubric (mid-year district assessment) demonstrates students are writing more, taking more time to brainstorm before writing and answering all the parts of a question. Because this is based on a format similar to the MCAS, Curley Middle staff believes it will help with student performance on the state test. To date, however, student gains on the MCAS have been slight (see school profile).

Staff members were able to describe many changes in classroom practice and student achievement due to the implementation of the plan's strategies. For example, the principal reported that special education teachers are now, with modifications, teaching the general curriculum and following the same pacing guide as regular education teachers. Content area meetings, as reported in teacher interviews, have been a source of change in teacher practice. In weekly content meetings, staff focus on the strategies and what part of the plan will be implemented with the curricular unit planned at that meeting. Faculty reported positive changes in their attitude towards planning and assessment. Most teachers interviewed by the PR team were able to describe changes they had made to their teaching practice because of the WSIP. Part of the School's Collaborative Coaching and Learning (CCL) initiative had led teachers in some disciplines to observe each others' classes and share feedback. Many staff members report reliance on the goals in the WSIP, and stated they are focused on implementation of the strategies outlined in the plan. The director of secondary mathematics reported that the amount of time spent on BCW (before-class work) in mathematics classes has decreased, therefore increasing the amount of time spent on instruction.

Curley Middle School is in the process of developing methods for monitoring the implementation of the WSIP. The principal and the school's director of instruction report that they are monitoring school improvement through individual teacher visits. Although teachers receive feedback from these visits, a formal process for measuring implementation gains relative to the WSIP is not in place. During the time of the panel review, processes were not in place for measuring implementation of the WSIP. Also, benchmarks to measure progress toward implementation were not adequate.

Furthermore, without clear and measurable benchmarks, it is impossible to assess gains. The Curley Middle WSIP states benchmarks, such as: “Students are going beyond basic facts” and “Students will be observed using multiple strategies to learn new vocabulary.” Because the meaning of “beyond basic facts” is not defined, nor is there a measurement device, it is impossible to measure student gains. Nor is it clear which of the multiple strategies might impact students’ learning of new vocabulary or how these would be measured. As a result, the current benchmarks in the WSIP are insufficient, as currently stated, to determine student gains.

Curley Middle School staff and leaders reported anecdotal improvements in student achievement levels. However, MCAS and other test scores do not yet demonstrate this improvement. In addition, the WSIP lacks adequate implementation benchmarks to assess how well school staff has put into practice the strategies listed in the plan. Even though faculty and staff report changes to classroom practice, this is also anecdotal at this time.

KEY QUESTION 2: DO THE CONDITIONS APPEAR TO BE IN PLACE FOR THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SCHOOL’S IMPROVEMENT PLAN?

Despite the described shortcomings in the current WSIP, there appear to be many conditions in place at Curley Middle School that may allow for successful implementation of a sound improvement plan. The principal is widely respected, focused on instructional leadership and contributes greatly to the likelihood of the success of improvement efforts at the school. There is unity among the staff, who through interviews exhibited a strong desire to improve student performance. Structures are in place to sustain the sense of collegiality evident to the PR team. The PR team expressed concern that leadership for change falls heavily on the principal himself and that the current depth and breadth of teacher leaders and other administrators may constrain the pace of implementation and impact of improvement initiatives.

Although the PR team saw evidence of resource support from the district, there is concern – also articulated by school leaders and staff – that the amount of mathematics coaching currently available at the school is inadequate to address the needed improvements in this subject area. In addition, the district is responsible for the development and approval of the WSIP, which has been deemed unsound by both the PR team and a DOE review team.

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

The Curley Middle School appears to have effective leadership and sound management. There are strong lines of communication at the school and support for a climate that is focused on high expectations for student behavior. Staff members express confidence in the principal and regard him as the school’s instructional leader. It is the judgment of the PR team that the leadership provided by the principal is a strength at the Curley and is important to maintaining the promising conditions at the school in the area of leadership and school management.

There are clear and open lines of communication at the school that are facilitated by the principal. A daily newsletter is used to manage and communicate school business. The school employs a public announcement system for communicating messages within the school. Staff reported that the principal conducts regular classroom walkthroughs, and that following these visits the principal regularly provides feedback to staff.

Leadership at Curley Middle has shown support for a school climate that is focused on high expectations for student and staff behavior. In recent years, there has been a large focus on improving student behavior at this school, much of which is currently delegated to the assistant principal. The PR team noted that staff provides a presence in the halls when students are passing between classes. Students are lead by staff to their next classroom or activity in an orderly fashion. Student interactions with team members were polite and respectful.

Since the principal came to Curley Middle five years ago, he has maintained that solutions to problems exist. "This school is all about the solution, not about the problem." This comment was repeated by a teacher to her students during one class observed by a team member. The principal makes an effort to know all of the students and maintains daily contact with them by greeting each one in the morning as they enter the school. Students reported feeling as though the principal really knows what they are doing and cares about them. He supports a positive school climate among the staff through staff parties, monthly breakfasts or lunches for staff, which are planned by a school climate committee. Some staff reported there is a lot of pressure but they realize this will help move the school forward. One teacher stated, "He can't make me work late, but he makes me want to work late." In general, the tone among staff is that through hard work, "we can reach our goals."

The principal presented himself as a strong instructional leader at Curley Middle, beginning with his vision: "No matter whom the child is; we want them to be focusing on academics with high expectations." In interviews with the PR team, staff members described the principal as the school's instructional leader. On the *DOE Instructional Staff Survey*, 22 out of 27 respondents (82%) either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, "Our school principal provides effective leadership to guide and support staff efforts to improve the academic performance of our students." The principal has also shown evidence of strong leadership through efforts to involve additional members of the school staff in leadership roles and decision-making processes. This has been promoted through the ILT, the part-time mathematics coach, full-time literacy coach, and three mathematics facilitators.

In summary, the Curley principal provides effective leadership and sound management. While the principal provides a strong condition for success at the school, the PR team expressed some concern over the effectiveness of the school's leadership beyond that of the principal. It is less clear if the surrounding leadership base is sufficient to assist in the implementation and support of WSIP, or whether overdependence on the principal will inhibit the pace and depth of change initiatives.

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

Evidence exists to indicate that the faculty supports planned improvement efforts. Teachers were involved in creating the school's improvement plan. Many of them voiced a belief that continued efforts will eventually lead to improvements for the students at the school. Faculty is actively involved in implementing the improvement initiatives. The PR team has some concern about staff belief in the causes for low student performance based on survey results based.

Curley Middle staff members agree with the improvement strategies being planned and implemented. The school's faculty and staff were actively involved in the process for developing the WSIP (see Key Question 1B). In interviews conducted by the PR team, staff members reported agreement with the strategies identified in the plan as priority needs for improvement.

On the *DOE Instructional Staff Survey*, 24 of 27 staff members (89%) either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “Our school has a well-defined plan for reaching student performance goals.”

Staff members at Curley Middle believe that improvement planning will result in measurable gains in student performance. Although there have been several years of very little improvement, teacher interviews revealed hopefulness that they are in the early stages of improvement. Teachers felt that, by using FAST-R and RISO data and the *America’s Choice* program, special education students – as well as regular education students – could be kept more on track to cover more material. Faculty felt encouraged that this curriculum provides the structure from which to build a more consistent program. Some staff, however, reported that more was needed – smaller class size, for example. Mathematics teachers felt that more coaching would be very beneficial. With additional resources, they believe they can better identify student weakness and guide instruction.

Teacher reports about content-area meetings and the panel’s classroom observations revealed that teachers are implementing many of the strategies that are designed to improve instruction (see Key Question 1C). The staff has a repertoire of methods through which they are actively engaged in implementing the schools initiatives. Examples include “Before Class Work,” “RISO” and listing lesson objectives on the board. The staff appears to be teaching the intended curriculum. The PR team saw evidence of a variety of assessments and instructional practices that are described in the WSIP.

As previously indicated, teachers at the Curley understand and support the improvement initiatives at the school. While the WSIP primarily identifies teaching practices in need of improvement as causal factors for low student performance, a review of the staff survey results revealed the Curley faculty also attributes low student performance to circumstances beyond their control. In response to the open-ended question, “What are the most significant causes of low student performance at your school?” on the *DOE Instructional Staff Survey*, staff indicated the following:

- Students come to school with poor learning skills (8 out of 27 respondents)
- Poor student behavior (8 out of 27 respondents)
- Limited skills when students come to the school (6 out of 27 respondents)
- Poor family involvement (5 out of 27 respondents)
- Large class sizes (3 out of 27 respondents)
- Limited resources (3 out of 27 respondents)

The inconsistency between staff reports of reasons for low student performance and the teacher practice-related causes identified in the Curley WSIP were a source of concern for the PR team. Nonetheless, the faculty and staff at the Curley school have shown support for the improvement efforts through commitment to the implementation of strategies in the WSIP.

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

It is the judgment of the PR team that the Boston Public Schools have provided the Curley School with support for certain improvement efforts through district initiatives. Some human resources have been provided, though the reduction in time allocation of the math coach is a significant concern. District guidance on the development of the WSIP was inadequate, as the current improvement plan at the Curley is unsound.

The district has supported Curley Middle through funding support for several new initiatives. The school has taken advantage of funds from a CSR grant to provide for paid after-school planning time for teachers. The RISO program supported by this grant provides teachers with almost instantaneous data and item analysis to inform their curricular planning. They also benefit from being chosen as a school to pilot the *America's Choice* curriculum, which provided the school with new resource materials.

The district has provided some human resources to support improvement efforts outlined in the WSIP. The principal and SSC members report having sufficient instructional resources. New mathematics and ELA teachers have been brought in mid-year to address large class sizes. A language acquisition coach was recently redeployed back into the school. However, the school's faculty expressed frustration that the mathematics coach was cut from a full-time to a part-time position. As stated by one staff member, "If math is the real issue here, why is there a full-time literacy coach and a math coach is here only two days per week?"

District failure to continue to provide support for the mathematics coach, although the school is in corrective action in this subject area, also presented concern for the PR team. As a result of part-time status, the math coach works primarily with newly appointed math facilitators, who also carry full-time teaching loads. This reduction in math expertise at the school is not indicative of support for the area that the school is in need of the greatest improvements.

The district provided the Curley Middle School with template documents instructions to develop the WSIP. Though the on-line database provides a variety of options and directives for composing a plan, and opportunities for consultation from district personnel, this was not sufficient to assist the Curley in the development of a sound improvement plan. The district approved a document that was judged unsound by both the PR team and the DOE. As a result, the Curley does not currently have a document that is likely to guide the necessary increases in student performance.

The principal reports that, led by a district initiative, the school has plans to change to a K-8 school in 2007. This initiative is being planned by the district and is supported by the staff at Curley Middle. Staff feels this will enable them to know the students better and provide greater continuity of the curriculum. This is noteworthy as it may affect the improvement initiatives currently in place at the school.

In summary, though the district has provided the Curley Middle School with some support, the reduction of a full time math coach and the approval of an improvement plan that is unsound are conditions that affect the success of improvement efforts.

CONCLUSION

It is the judgment of the PR team that the Curley Middle School has some of the necessary conditions in place to successfully implement school improvement. They have a highly capable principal, who is committed, well-respected, and who is critical to the implementation of the school's improvement efforts. Although the PR team expressed some concern in regard to teachers' beliefs about reasons for low student performance at the school, the Curley faculty has shown support for improvement and the WSIP through implementation of its strategies. Though the district has supplied some resources to support school improvement, the depletion of mathematics coaching time and insufficient guidance offered on the construction of the WSIP are conditions that have impeded improvement efforts.

As written, the 2005-07 Curley Middle School WSIP is not clear and specific enough to guide improvement efforts. The areas of greatest concern relate to the lack of coherence between the areas of student weaknesses and identified causes, and the lack of priorities for strategies to address weaknesses and potential causes. Benchmarks in the WSIP are unclear and/or immeasurable and as a result, gains cannot be reported in relation to plan implementation. The process used to develop the WSIP shows promise for success, even though the PR team determined some aspects of the planning process provided less clarity than others.

APPENDIX A
Team Members

Ann Dinsmoor, Panel Review Chair, SchoolWorks LLC, Beverly, MA

Leslie Beaulieu, Panel Review Co-Chair, SchoolWorks LLC, Beverly, MA

Matthew Pakos, Panel Coordinator, Massachusetts Department of Education, Malden, MA

Dan Costello, Panelist, Principal, Sherwood Middle School, Shrewsbury, MA

Bridget Rodriguez, Panelist, former Principal, Cambridge Public Schools, Cambridge, MA

Kathryn Riley, Panelist, Massachusetts Department of Education, Malden, MA

Joyce Bowen, Panelist, Massachusetts Department of Education, Malden, MA

APPENDIX B
Mary E. Curley Middle School
Boston Public Schools
POTENTIALLY UNDER-PERFORMING PANEL REVIEW SCHEDULE
February 7 and 8, 2006

Day 1

- 9:00—9:30 a.m. **Panel chairperson and panel coordinator meet at hotel** to discuss and clarify roles, prepare for the first team meeting, and review general logistics/schedule for the review.
- 9:30a.m. –11:30a.m. **Team meeting # 1:** team meets for the first time to discuss each panelist’s individual analysis; team forms preliminary judgments on key questions.
- 11:30a.m.—1p.m. **Lunch and travel to the school** (*NOTE: In districts undergoing multiple school reviews, superintendent interviews may be scheduled between 11am and 1 pm at the hotel.*)
- 1:00 – 2:00p.m. Panel meets with the school’s **Instructional Leadership Team**.
- 2:00—3:00 p.m. Panelists meet with the district **Superintendent** (and Assistant Superintendent, if appropriate).
- 3:15—4:30p.m. Panel meets with the **Principal** (and one other school-based individual, if appropriate).
- 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.

Day 2

All activities take place at the school.

- 7:30—8:00 a.m. Panel meets with the Principal
- 8:00—8:30 a.m. Panel meets with the School Council
- 8:30—9:00 a.m. Panelists meet individually with Focus Groups. The Panel Review Coordinator and the Principal will identify participants for each Focus Group. The groups will be organized to include groups of individuals who can respond to questions designed for parents, students (middle and high schools), 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:** panel meets to discuss findings so far and to plan the remainder of the day (working lunch).

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

1:00—2:00 p.m. Panelists meet with teacher focus 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	

2:15—2:30 p.m. Chair meets with the Principal to discuss next steps in the process.

2:30—5:00 p.m. **Team meeting # 4:** panel deliberates, organizes evidence, and formulates responses to key questions.

Instructions for teacher observations, individual interviews, and focus groups

1. Observations Each panelist will observe at least two class lessons in order to obtain a representative sample of the school’s individual classrooms. The purpose of the classroom observations is to judge the quality of the learning environment, which is a critical aspect of the school’s overall conditions, and a determinant in whether or not the school will be able to successfully implement its improvement plan. The learning environment includes:
 - The physical space—lighting, size, classroom temperature, etc.
 - The classroom organization—desk arrangement, resources available to students, orderliness, etc.
 - The level of the teacher’s preparation for instruction; the students’ readiness for learning.
 - The interaction between teacher and students—the students’ level of engagement or withdrawal.
 - The level of the teacher’s expectations for student learning and performance.
 - The level and quality of instructional practice in the school. (Panelists are not evaluating individual teachers.)

2. Individual Teacher Interviews The purpose of the teacher interview that follows the observation is to:
 - Clarify the evaluator's impressions of the classroom dynamic and learning environment
 - Determine what the teacher considers to be the chief learning needs of students across the school and within his or her classroom
 - Determine the teacher's understanding of the school's plan to address those needs and to improve student performance
 - Determine the teacher's role in the overall mission and improvement plan of the school

3. Teacher Focus Groups The purpose of the teacher focus groups is to:
 - Determine what each teacher considers to be the chief learning needs of students across the school and within his or her classroom
 - Determine each teacher's understanding of the school's plan to address those needs and to improve student performance
- Determine each teacher's role in the overall mission and improvement plan of the school

Taken together, the teacher observations, interviews, and focus groups should provide a comprehensive view of the staff's understanding of, and participation and investment in, planning and implementing improvement initiatives.