

REPORT OF FACT FINDING REVIEW Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School Chicopee Public Schools

Executive Summary

The Fact-Finding (FF) team conducted interviews with personnel school-wide, observations across all grade levels and subject areas and completed an extensive review of documents at the Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School (FVMMS). As a result, the FF team identified numerous areas that are in need of improvement if the school is to see necessary increases in student performance. Although the school has a few strengths that they can build upon, improvement planning requires a sense of urgency at FVMMS across all domains. District support and guidance is critical to increase the likelihood of success, as well as collaboration from the entire school community.

Domain I: Curriculum and Instruction

In the domain of curriculum and instruction, the FF team identified several reasons for low student performance, which include: insufficient written curriculum in mathematics and ELA, inadequate instructional practices and the lack of an adequate system to assess and monitor student achievement. In order to see necessary improvements, curriculum and guidance documents are needed for all academic areas. Instructional practices must be monitored and evaluated to improve many areas of weakness. An assessment system that can be used to measure student achievements, identify gaps in performance and inform classroom instruction must be implemented.

Domain II: Climate and Culture for Learning

In the domain of climate and culture for learning, positive student behavior and a good rapport among staff and students are strengths at FVMMS. Collegiality and communications among faculty and leadership, however, are less positive. Low expectations for student achievement and a belief that low student performance persists as a result of external factors continue to plague the culture for learning at FVMMS. As improvement planning begins, FVMMS must provide opportunities to build positive, collegial relationships to develop a professional climate at the school. The entire school community should be involved in establishing and prioritizing goals for improvement and to begin to create unity and ownership for school success.

Domain III: School Leadership

Significant gaps exist in instructional leadership at FVMMS. A unified vision that focuses on teaching, learning and improvement does not exist at the school. The current leadership structure lacks sufficient personnel and clear definitions of roles and responsibilities to guide the significant improvement efforts that must occur at FVMMS. The system for evaluating and providing feedback to teachers is not adequate to inform improvements in their practices. These are critical deficits that must be addressed with a sense of urgency. District assistance

and support to address the above-mentioned weaknesses is imperative to the success of school leadership.

Domain IV: Organizational Structures and Management

A lack of thoughtful planning, implementation and monitoring of educational and improvement initiatives has impeded the school's success in a number of areas. Grade-level meetings lack a specific agenda and instructional time is not maximized. FVMMS, with assistance from the district, must develop and implement a structure to support improvement efforts. This should include input from all of the school's stakeholders, focusing first on areas that will have the greatest impact on teaching and learning.

Domain V: District Support

FVMMS has not received adequate guidance or support from the district to impact improvement. Across the four domains, the school has significant needs that require district assistance and oversight. The district must make improvement at FVMMS a priority and take initiative to assist school leadership in planning, implementing and overseeing these efforts. This may require assistance beyond what the district can supply.

Fact Finding Review Process

The Fact-Finding Review is the third stage in the process used to assess school performance under the Massachusetts School and District Accountability System. At the first stage of the process, a school's performance and improvement on state MCAS tests is rated. Schools that perform in the lowest School Performance Rating categories (very high percentage of students with failing MCAS performance; low percentage proficient and advanced) may be referred for a Panel Review.

The Panel Review process constitutes the second stage of the School and District Accountability System. Panel Reviews are conducted to assist the Commissioner of Education in determining whether state intervention is needed to guide improvement efforts in schools in which students' MCAS performance is critically low and no trend toward improved student performance is evident from MCAS data. Panels consisting of 5 - 8 members review data and written information on the school's performance and improvement efforts and spend two days visiting the school and meeting with school and district leaders.

At the conclusion of the review process, the Review Panel's charge is to advise the Commissioner of Education of its judgment on two questions:

- Does the school under review have a sound plan for improving student performance?
- Are the conditions in place for the successful implementation of the school's improvement plan?

If the answer to either or both of these questions is no, the Commissioner may declare the school to be underperforming.

Schools that are declared to be underperforming enter the third stage in the School and District Accountability System and undergo an in-depth diagnostic Fact-Finding Review.

The purposes of the Fact-Finding Review are to:

- Provide an in-depth diagnosis of the school's strengths and areas for improvement, including specific causal analysis.
- Use extensive observation (school and classroom) to build a knowledge base for the school's planning work.
- Make specific recommendations for the development of the school's improvement plan

At the conclusion of the review process, the Fact-Finding Team's charge is to advise the Commissioner and Board of Education of its judgment on two key questions:

1. What are the reasons for the low levels of student performance in ELA and mathematics at this school?
2. What are the prospects for improved student performance at this school?

The Fact-Finding Team answers the key questions based on evidence collected through observations of teaching and learning, interviews of faculty, students, administrators, district personnel and other school stakeholders and through the review of documents, including the

school improvement plan, student assessment information, curriculum documents and student work. The team's judgments must be robust and fully supported by evidence.

The Fact-Finding Team's judgments are guided by a protocol that requires the team to respond to the key questions in each of the following domains: curriculum and instruction; culture and climate for learning, school leadership, organizational structures and management, and district support. The Fact-Finding Team uses its professional judgment to focus on domains that reveal key strengths and areas for improvement in the school.

Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School Profile

Enrollment

Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School (FVMMS) serves students in grades 6-8. Enrollment at FVMMS increased from 742 students in 2002 to a peak of 857 in 2004, then decreased to 798 in 2005. Percentages of student subgroup populations also changed from 2002 to 2005, specifically among Hispanics (6 percent in 2002 to 15 percent in 2005) and Whites (93 percent in 2002 to 81 percent in 2005). Increases were also seen in Low-Income students (38 percent to 49 percent) and First Language Not English students (9 percent to 13 percent). Proportions of FVMMS student subgroups in 2005, as compared to state averages, are presented below:

Subgroup	2005 Enrollment (%)	
	School	State
Asian	1	5
Black	3	9
Hispanic	15	12
Native American	0	0.3
White	81	74
Low-Income	49	28
First Language Not English	13	14
Limited English Proficient	2	5
Special Education	15	16

In 2005, the attendance rate at FVMMS was 92.9 percent, with students absent 12.0 days on average. Attendance rates at FVMMS are similar to those throughout the district. Although the overall attendance rate at FVMMS is slightly lower than the state average of 94.2 percent, the average number of days absent is 2.0 days higher than the state average. Absenteeism appears to increase by grade level, with the highest rates in 8th grade and the lowest rates in 6th grade. There are no significant differences in attendance rates for males and females. Hispanic students, however, have the lowest attendance rate (90.3%) of all racial subgroups at the school. Similarly, Hispanic students have the highest rate of chronic absenteeism (39.7%) and the highest average number of days absent (15.2 days). The school's retention rate was 3.5 percent in 2004, the last year for which this data are available. The school's in-school suspension rate in 2005 was 0.0 percent, while out-of-school suspensions averaged 5.0 percent – a significant drop from 2004

in which the out-of-school suspension rate was 22.3 percent. The 2005 rate of out-of-school suspensions is well below the district average of 11.4 percent and slightly lower than the state average of 6.1 percent.

Staffing

The 2005-2006 Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School staffing report indicates that the school is comprised of 4 administrators, 61 teachers, 3 guidance counselors, 1 teacher leader/curriculum facilitator and 4 additional staff members. The principal has been at the school for 10 years in various capacities, has a total of two years of administrative experience and is in her first year as principal of this school. Of the teachers, approximately 15 percent have been at the school since it opened 11 years ago, and approximately 55 percent have been at the school for five or more years. Roughly 10 percent of the teachers are new to the school this year. Fifty percent of the teachers at FMVVS have 10 or more years of teaching experience, and 28 percent have less than 5 years of teaching experience. Nearly 85 percent of teachers are reported as being highly qualified, and approximately 47 percent hold an advanced degree.

MCAS Overview

Students at Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School are assessed in Grade 7 in English language arts (ELA) and in Grades 6 and 8 in mathematics. The school's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report for 2005 Mid-Cycle IV shows an accountability status of Identified for Improvement – Subgroups Only for ELA and Corrective Action for mathematics. In ELA, the school has consistently made AYP for the aggregate population but has not done so for subgroups since they were first reported in 2003.¹ In 2005, the Low Income subgroup did not make AYP. In mathematics, the school has not made AYP in the aggregate since 2000, with the exception of 2003, and has not made AYP for subgroups since they were first reported in 2003. In 2005, the subgroups that did not meet AYP included Special Education, Low Income and White. The Special Education and Low Income subgroups did meet their Composite Performance Index Improvement Targets in mathematics but failed to make AYP due to attendance rates below 92 percent.

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). The subgroups meeting the minimum sample size at Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School in 2005 were Low-Income and White for ELA, and Special Education, Low-Income, Hispanic and White for mathematics.

GRADE 6**Mathematics MCAS Results**

Results of the 2005 Grade 6 Mathematics MCAS for students at Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School are presented below:

2005 Mathematics	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
Aggregate	3	19	44	34
Regular Education	3	20	47	30
Special Education	0	4	30	67

Regular Education students have significantly outperformed Special Education students. Overall, there has been a gradual increase in student performance at FVMMS since 2002, as reflected in the aggregate Grade 6 Mathematics MCAS performance presented below:

Aggregate Mathematics	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
2005	3	19	44	34
2004	4	15	34	47
2003	4	9	34	53
2002	1	10	36	53
2001	3	14	32	51

The percentage of students scoring in Proficient or Advanced has increased from a low of 11 percent in 2002 to 22 percent in 2005. Correspondingly, the percentage of students in Warning/Failing has decreased from 53 percent in 2002 to 34 percent in 2005. Special Education students have also experienced some improvement, although this is generally limited to more students scoring in Needs Improvement. In 2001, 0 percent of Special Education students scored Proficient or Advanced, which increased to 4 percent in 2005. Changes in students scoring Needs Improvement has increased from a low of 7 percent in 2002 to 30 percent in 2005.

GRADE 7**ELA MCAS Results**

Results of the 2005 Grade 7 ELA MCAS for students at Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School are presented below:

2005 ELA	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
Aggregate	3	44	40	13
Regular Education	4	50	40	6
Special Education	0	10	41	49

Regular Education students at FVMMS have significantly outperformed Special Education students. Overall, performance in ELA has been mixed since 2001, as reflected in the aggregate Grade 7 ELA MCAS performance presented on the following page:

Aggregate ELA	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
2005	3	44	40	13
2004	1	46	41	11
2003	2	46	39	13
2002	1	52	35	12
2001	0	38	39	23

Performance was lowest in 2001, when 38 percent of students scored Proficient or Advanced and 23 percent of students scored Warning/Failing. Performance then peaked in 2002, when 53 percent of students scored Proficient or Advanced and 12 percent of students scored Warning/Failing. From 2003 to 2005, the percentage of students scoring Proficient or Advanced declined to 47 percent, while the percentage of students scoring Warning/Failing rose slightly to 13 percent. Performance for Regular Education and Special Education students showed similar trends, with lowest performance in 2001, a peak in 2002 and decline from 2003 to 2005. The 2005 performance of students in all categories, however, does show an overall increase from 2001.

GRADE 8

Mathematics MCAS Results

Results of the 2005 Grade 8 Mathematics MCAS for students at Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School are presented below:

2005 Math	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
Aggregate	3	13	30	54
Regular Education	4	15	37	44
Special Education	0	2	7	91

Similar to the Grade 6 mathematics results, Regular Education students have significantly outperformed Special Education students at FVMMS. Overall, student performance has declined since 2001, as reflected in the aggregate Grade 8 Mathematics MCAS performance presented below:

Aggregate Math	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
2005	3	13	30	54
2004	2	12	34	52
2003	5	15	38	42
2002	1	9	40	50
2001	2	15	39	45

In 2001, 17 percent of students scored Proficient or Advanced. This decreased to a low of 10 percent in 2002, then averaged 16 percent from 2003 to 2005. There has been similar variability in students scoring Needs Improvement and Warning/Failing, with a slight decrease from 39 percent Needs Improvement in 2001 to 30 percent in 2005 and a slight increase from 45 percent in 2001 to 54 percent in Warning/Failing. For Regular Education students, performance in 2005 was relatively similar to performance in 2001, with some variability in between. Despite corresponding variability from year to year, Special Education students' performance overall has increased modestly since 2001, when 100 percent of students scored Warning/Failing.

Key Domains of Inquiry

I: Curriculum and Instruction

In the domain of curriculum and instruction, the Fact-Finding (FF) team found three areas that have contributed to the low student performance at Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School (FVMMS) and that are in need of improvement: 1) Written curriculum in mathematics and ELA are not sufficient to guide the scope and sequence of instruction; 2) In many cases, instructional practice at the school was found to be inadequate; and, 3) The school lacks an adequate system to assess and monitor student achievement.

In their current form, the curriculum materials at FVMMS are not adequate to effectively guide instructional decisions and classroom practice. Though efforts to write curriculum are currently underway (and in various states of completion), many teachers are not actively involved in the curriculum writing process and are unable to clearly articulate details about these efforts (e.g., development of pacing guides and efforts to align the curriculum with Massachusetts standards). There are no deadlines for completion of curriculum documents. Focus group interviews conducted by the FF team revealed that about one-third of the faculty lack a clear understanding of who is responsible for the creation of new curricula, what work is currently underway and when it will be completed. When asked if staff could provide the team with a copy of the curriculum, none was provided. Many staff expressed frustration over the history of lack of guidance and follow-through around curriculum issues at the school, indicating “The curriculum is the textbook.” The principal stated, “Essentially, we don’t have a [mathematics] curriculum. It is a work in progress.” A review of the mathematics curriculum created by the district is merely a list of frameworks and the chapter that met that standard. A FVMMS staff member indicated that only 13 of the 39 Grade 8 Curriculum Frameworks were covered in text chapters.

Many teachers at the FVMMS are not demonstrating an appropriate level of sophistication and understanding of what comprises good instruction. Although the FF team discovered pockets of good instructional practice at the FVMMS, classroom instruction in approximately half the classrooms lacked basic elements of good lesson design and delivery. In 41 classroom observations, nearly half failed to introduce lesson objectives clearly and did not provide evidence of alignment with Massachusetts standards. A similar proportion of lessons lacked effective closure. Inadequate instructional practices were also marked by a lack of questions to check for student understanding and/or higher-order questions to deepen and extend student learning. In 26 out of 41 lessons observed by team members (63%), the use of higher-order questioning was not observed as a teaching method. Similarly, in the majority of classrooms, some students were visibly disengaged from lessons and were not refocused by effective teacher questioning. Provocative questions or inquisitive comments from students were not effectively addressed by the teacher in order to move the original lesson forward. Observers commonly witnessed missed teaching opportunities that could have been used to extend thinking and enrich learning in the classroom.

Through focus group interviews with more than 60 members of the faculty and staff, the FF team heard consistent frustration and confusion regarding expectations for improvement and success.

Teachers frequently indicated that they were working hard. As stated by one staff member, “Ninety percent of the teachers work really hard at this school. How can we be under-performing?” Another FVMMS teacher indicated, “I have been teaching a lot of years and feel I don’t know what they want me to do. I’m frustrated. They say to make it standards-based but they don’t say what that looks like. We filled out a slip saying I am willing to do a workshop on standards-based lessons and nothing came of it.”

FVMMS has not established procedures necessary to reliably measure, analyze and monitor student achievement. Beyond the administration and use of MCAS data, the FF team found little evidence of other established assessment strategies. Although Read 180 is in use at the school, no clear evidence was presented to indicate how achievement data were being collected or how this information was being used to support teaching and learning. In the 2004-05 school year, the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) was given to the entire seventh grade. There is not a clear explanation, however, for how the faculty used this data, nor was anyone able to communicate how this assessment would fit into the school’s future assessment scheme. Finally, classroom observations and focus group interviews revealed little evidence of classroom assessment strategies to support standards-based learning or to inform instructional practices.

The FF team identified the following strengths within the domain of curriculum and instruction that FVMMS can build upon as the school begins its improvement efforts.

There is a core of administrators, faculty and staff who are aware of the need to develop curriculum and are beginning to take steps forward. FVMMS leadership and staff report that they have a rough draft in place and have selected topics that the curriculum should cover for each grade level. There is a school-based team working on curriculum that the team hopes will be in place in the fall. As stated by one member of this team, “We have a sense of what others are doing, but nothing is published.”

In addition, there are FVMMS personnel who believe improvements are needed in the areas of curriculum, instruction and assessment. They are seeking support and structure and, as reported by the principal, are “beginning to toe the line.” During focus groups conducted by the FF team, several staff revealed knowledge and expertise in standards-based lesson design and expressed a willingness to model their techniques. One teacher stated, “It’s the way that we look at delivering the curriculum. We are missing the boat.” It’s [the curriculum] not getting to them [students] in a way that is meaningful.” This speaks to capacity.

To address the areas in need of improvement, the FF team prioritized the following next steps for the FVMMS in the domain of curriculum and instruction.

- **Raise the school-wide level of “agency and resolve.”** Take steps to increase the school’s level of power and influence to bring about change in the areas of curriculum, instruction and assessment. Recognize that much of this power is rooted in the establishment of a common belief that changes in these areas are critical to the process of improving student performance.

- **Create a structure and timeline for completion of the written curriculum.** This must be done carefully and thoughtfully. It requires immediate attention. Also, it must be done correctly to avoid further disappointments created in the past when efforts failed or were not fully implemented.
- **Provide professional development and training opportunities for teachers to see and practice standards-based instruction.** This could include mentoring programs and modeling of classroom lessons. Identify those within the school who are implementing successful creative teaching techniques and let them serve as models for others. Develop partnerships with successful schools.
- **FVMMS must establish a system for analyzing and monitoring assessment data that provides information in the areas of student strength and weakness.** It is important to select a program that will generate assessment data that can be collected and utilized in a manner that is helpful and readily available, so as not to repeat past failed attempts. Staff must be trained to ensure assessments are administered and the data are used properly. Involve people who will monitor this process to ensure that it is ongoing.

II: Culture and Climate for Learning

Good student classroom behavior and a positive rapport between teachers and students are strengths at FVMMS. This will help form the foundation for the school's future improvement efforts. However, there are three key elements related to the school's climate and culture for learning that have contributed to low student performance rates at the school. 1) The staff climate lacks professional collegiality, open communication and a common commitment to the improvement goals; 2) A significant number of the faculty and administration believe that student performance weaknesses are primarily caused by external factors that are not within the school's control; and, 3) The performance expectations that some teachers and administrators hold for the students at FVMMS – and, in some cases, even for themselves – are not sufficiently rigorous to bring about the desired change in overall school performance.

Positive and respectful interactions between staff and students and sound behavior management are strengths at FVMMS. The FF team was in unanimous agreement that in all but a few classrooms, faculty-to-student rapport was respectful and very positive. Teachers are dedicated, caring and hard working and they respect that about themselves. Some staff members are utilizing creative teaching methods designed to increase student expectations through better student engagement. Students responded well to the high expectations set by teachers for classroom behavior. In 37 of 41 classrooms visited (90%), team members found high expectations for student behavior. In only 4 of the 41 classrooms (10%) did observers find classroom management an issue.

Although the FF team found behavioral expectations to be high, some teachers – and even a few administrators – do not hold high expectations for the academic achievement of all students. Although observers found 80 - 90% of students engaged and attentive in the lessons, they found that 10 - 20% were allowed to remain disengaged as long as they were behaving. The team also asserted that the traditional, teacher-led style of instruction – which was predominant in most

classrooms – promoted more passive (as opposed to active) learning. Of the 41 classes observed, 75% were strictly teacher-led in nature. Members of the FF team also indicated that this instructional style might have been dictated by large class sizes – particularly in grades 6 and 8, where it was not unusual to have classes of 26 – 29 students. As one teacher stated, “I think the large class size is a huge issue. How can teachers deal with such large groups and handle the curriculum, as well as manage behavior?”

A significant portion of school faculty has not yet been able to move beyond the belief that external factors are the primary cause for low student performance (e.g., lack of family support, low income, poor student attitudes). Most staff members do not recognize that there are many influential factors that can be controlled within the school – for example, values, classroom practices and overall school potential. The FF team believes that this attitude has contributed to the low expectations for student academic achievement.

On the other hand, there are pockets of teachers and administrators in the school who possess high academic standards for all students and whose beliefs indicate there is a way to enhance the learning environment at the school that will benefit the achievement of all students. In 7 out of 41 (17%) classroom visits, observers determined that the lesson content exceeded standards. Students were frequently asked questions – at times, higher-order questions – to assess for understanding. As stated by one FVMMS faculty member, “We have high expectations of the students as well as strict discipline policies. Academic standards need to be high and enforced.”

In the judgment of the FF team, the FVMMS community lacks professional unity and a commitment to a common school vision, both of which are critical establishing a positive culture and climate for learning. Divisions between and among faculty and administration – sparked by the intensity of the accountability lens and dynamics created by recent changes in leadership – have resulted in stresses and tensions that have negatively influenced the culture for learning at FVMMS. In interviews, faculty, staff and administrators all acknowledged that a difficult professional climate exists at the school as a result of misunderstanding, varied information and ambiguity about the future of the school. One FVMMS staff member stated, “We aren’t connected. We’re on separate teams... There is a lot of gossip and low morale. People say things and forget that we are colleagues and should be working together.” Although this climate was created by a complex set of factors that have evolved over the course of the school’s 10-year history, the FF team also determined that issues with the school’s climate and culture relate to a lack of school-wide focus on the integration of sound written curricula and instructional practices.

Some teachers, however, acknowledged that they are ready for change and are seeking help and direction. As stated by one FVMMS staff member, “I would imagine there needs to be a larger unity measure among the faculty working toward the same goal as a whole. If the goals are clear and tangible and everyone does his/her part, things will change.”

To address the areas in need of improvement, the FF team prioritized the following next steps for the FVMMS in the domain of culture and climate for learning.

- **Develop a positive collegial atmosphere.** Not only does the majority of staff know a positive environment is needed, they are ready and poised for the development of such a culture. During one focus group meeting, those in attendance realized they had never before met as a group and within one half-hour meeting, readily established a positive collegial relationship.
- **Use the existing professional knowledge base on positive professional school climate to form the foundation for this work.** Connect with a reference library of great literature and research. Seek support from organizations such as the Department of Education, universities, and Mass. Insights consultants, for example. Make time for the development of professional relationships around common passions.
- **Create a process for the school community to become involved in the process of establishing and achieving school-wide goals.** Allow everyone to feel their opinion is valid and heard. This creates ownership for the school and the improvement efforts. The Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) process may be one method to begin this process. All stakeholders need to have an opportunity to invest in the success of the school. Establish ground rules for positive interaction among all members of the school.

III: School Leadership

In the FF team's judgment, FVMMS has serious gaps in instructional leadership that have contributed to the school's history of low student achievement. The gaps include the following: 1) Although the current principal has a vision for the school and many qualities of a strong instructional leader, she has not (in her brief tenure in this new role) been able to instill this vision in the hearts and minds of all stakeholders; 2) The current leadership structure at FVMMS does not have sufficient strength of personnel or clearly-designed roles to effectively guide and support the kind of instructional and curricular changes facing the school; and, 3) Supervision and evaluation practices have not been used effectively to diagnose strong and weak instructional practices or to offer constructive suggestions for improvement.

The principal clearly articulates a vision for a culture and climate for learning. This vision is rooted in high expectations for achievement of all members of the school community – staff and students alike. In this first year in the position, the principal has responded to the urgency of the school's accountability status by exercising a strong and – at times – even forceful leadership style. “My ultimate goal is to have a school with teachers who have passion and a willingness to change.” This unfamiliar style has been welcomed by some staff and not by others, which the FF team found to be a key factor contributing to the current lack of shared commitment to a common vision. The principal indicated, “I'm working to change a belief system. A very traditional one [education beliefs] prevails here. There is a lack of understanding of what a standards-based classroom is [looks like].” As a new leader inheriting many school issues, it has been difficult for the principal to gain momentum toward this vision in her first year, especially without full collaboration. The principal stated, “I'm having difficult conversations with people who have not been held accountable for years... I am hiring teachers who will toe the line and do what needs to be done...We currently have a mix [of teachers with these qualities].”

Although almost half the staff showed evidence of “pushing back or actively resisting change” toward improvement initiatives, the FF team heard positive comments from at least 75% of the staff when asked about the current principal’s ability to move the school improvement agenda forward. Even though some stakeholders’ feedback indicated a response range of “not at all supportive” to “very supportive,” it was the general consensus that the principal is capable of building the conditions to realize her vision for this school. The superintendent stated: “[The principal] is talented, reflective and bright and she knows what to do.” Teachers expressed confidence in the principal’s vision as an instructional leader and a leader of change, for example:

- “I worked with [the principal] last year. I honestly see her as double the person this year. She wants the best for the school, the kids, the teachers, and she has been under the gun. So for me, I think she will get it done.”
- “The majority of faculty want to see student achievement at our school improve. Personalities can be tough. The principal has had a difficult time with resistance to change. She has worked really hard to bring about change.”
- “She’s outstanding and a terrific leader. She sees the big picture.”

Despite concerns about low morale and the lack of professional unity, the FF team believes that the principal possesses the qualities and abilities that will help lead the school toward improvement. In a recent faculty survey conducted by the principal, nearly all respondents stated that an effective school faculty is one that works together. The staff seems poised for change.

The current leadership structure at FVMMS does not have sufficient clarity or strength of personnel to effectively guide and support the kind of instructional and curricular changes needed at the school. At least six established groups (the three vice principals, the Curriculum Leadership Team (CTL), the School Council, the PIM team and the six Grade Level teams) were identified as having a role in the leadership and management structure of the school. However, there were concerns noted in regard to the leadership capacity of most of these groups. Concerns about the lack of strength of the school’s vice principals in the area of curriculum and instruction and the lack of consistency in their roles with grade-level teams were commonly expressed to the FF team. Differences in philosophy and opinion between and among the CTL and the principal were evident and result in a divided group. The School Council was rarely mentioned in discussions about school improvement. With the exception of the current PIM team, facilitated by the mathematics support specialist, the FF team was not able to gain a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of these identified leadership teams, how their efforts fit together or who stood out as key leaders in the school. The principal has begun a process of identifying, seeking out and soliciting commitment from a core of teachers to assume leadership roles. However, these positions and associated responsibilities have yet to be defined. The FF team concluded that the lack of a coherent leadership structure and the lack of strong core instructional leaders are both factors that severely limit the prospects of improvement in school-wide achievement.

The school's practice of supervising and evaluating teachers has not provided an accurate portrayal of the range of instruction occurring at the school, nor has it been used as an effective means to identify teaching strengths and weaknesses and make suggestions for improvement. While the school's faculty evaluation form contains many areas that are important in assessing good instruction, the reported results did not match the observations made by the FF team during classroom observations. A quick review of the faculty evaluations completed by the former principal during the 04-05 school year (provided to the FF team without identifying information) revealed that 80 – 90% of teachers were assessed as commendable in all areas. In addition, the evaluation report rarely contained corrective feedback. As indicated in Domain I of this report, results of observations by the FF team noted clear gaps in the instructional practice of 40% to 50% of the teachers observed. In addition, the principal reported that the school's vice principals are not instructional leaders and are not familiar with standards-based instruction; they are primarily responsible for handling discipline issues. All evaluations for the 05-06 school year, however, were reported to have been conducted by vice principals. The FF team was not provided with any results from this evaluation cycle. In focus groups, teachers reported various styles and levels of consistency in the overall faculty evaluation process.

The FF team identified the following strengths that FVMMS can build upon in the domain of school leadership as the school begins its improvement efforts.

As previously indicated, the current principal is highly regarded for her energy, commitment, perseverance, knowledge and skill as an educator, and willingness to hold people accountable. She has a clear vision of what is needed to improve the school. The team observed many individuals among the staff who demonstrated creative ideas and an interest in instructional leadership. The current Math Support Specialist possesses valuable knowledge and skill with regard to standards-based learning and has already made strong inroads towards improvement in her first year in the role.

To address the areas in need of improvement, the FF team prioritized the following next steps for the FVMMS in the domain of school leadership.

- **A strong Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) needs to be established.** This team should be comprised of teachers and administrators who possess knowledge and skills in the areas of curriculum, instruction and assessment and who demonstrate a willingness to assume leadership roles within the school.
- **Align the supervision and evaluation process with the expectations for standards-based learning.** Take strides to ensure that the supervisors and evaluators are skilled at identifying strengths and weaknesses in instructional practice and are able to offer constructive feedback and support. Tying supervision and evaluation to the school's recent focus on standards-based learning will help to ensure that these new strategies are being successfully integrated into classroom practice.

- **It is strongly encouraged that each staff member strive to become a leader of his/her own “organization.” At the same time, staff must become actively involved in a cooperative school-wide effort to create a “new and improved” version of the FVMMS.** School-wide reform requires each school professional to assume responsibility for “leading” the change process. This can be accomplished most successfully when individuals understand and agree with the reform strategies and, ultimately, commit to implement them in their own settings – whether in their classrooms or in their respective offices.

IV: Organizational Structures and Management

There are two key issues in the domain of organizational structures and management at FVMMS.

1) Measures designed to improve student performance often lack thoughtful planning, thorough implementation and effective follow through; and, 2) Use of time during the school day for teacher collaboration and classroom instruction is not used to its fullest advantage.

Lack of thoughtful planning, rigor of implementation and follow through emerged as common factors that have contributed to the school’s frequent failure to implement important educational initiatives and programs critical to the success of students. Many of these have already been discussed in this report. Examples include: The lack of soundness of the current SIP; the absence of written curriculum materials and a system of assessing and monitoring student progress; limited implementation of new knowledge and skills presented during professional development time (e.g., standards-based learning); and, inadequacies in the supervision and evaluation process. In addition, the lack of full integration of the Smart Board technology and implementation of the Galileo assessment system were additional initiatives that the FF team identified as a source of frustration for leadership and staff. One FVMMS staff member indicated, “The district spends tens of thousands of dollars on programs and the follow-through isn’t there.”

The other issue identified by the FF Team as impeding student performance in the domain of organizational structures and managements is inefficient use of time during the school day. Time for teacher collaboration and classroom instructional time is not maximized.

Currently, most common planning time at FVMMS is not dictated by an agenda nor is it used to collaborate with staff who serve similar students or teach the same subjects. Instead, grade-level teams individually decide how to use this time. Grade-level teams reported that at least half their team time each week was devoted to parent conferencing. Remaining time is used subjectively, to address the needs of each team as they see fit. Meetings are not facilitated by teacher leaders and were not agenda-driven. One teacher described the structure as “sort of laissez faire.” Grade-level meetings do not provide opportunities for meeting with teachers of the same subject matter or within the grade level from another team. These meetings do not include all teachers who work with the group of students on the team. Incidentally, the FF team identified this as another example how the lack of leadership and lack of clear structures and management were impeding school success.

In addition, the narrow focus of the current grade level team concept often served to isolate teams from each other and create cultural dynamics that were not conducive to a truly collegial

and collaborative school climate. The FF team concluded that at least some of the undercurrent of conflict and low morale was being exacerbated by the nature of the current team structure. Some staff indicated that they had rarely, if ever, met as a group. As stated by one individual, “There is no designated time at the school for [this group] to meet. We never have met before. We are very isolated from each other.”

Instructional time at the FVMMS is not currently used as effectively and as creatively as it could be. In about half of the classrooms observed by the FF team, poor management and classroom organization resulted in as much as five to seven minutes of instructional time being lost at the beginning and end of each lesson. As one observer stated, “when you only have 40 - 45 minute periods to start, five minutes is a lot.” Additionally, teachers in focus group interviews recognized that it was not uncommon for students to be idle when they could be more productively engaged. They referred to the recent MCAS testing schedule, where 90 minutes of unproductive time preceded the actual start of the tests. Another concern was voiced over the length of mathematics teaching periods being too short to allow for use of hands-on teaching materials. One teacher stated, “My classes are so short. By the time I settle them in [students] and pass out materials, it’s nearly time to collect them again.” In addition, special subject teachers noted concerns about how their students are scheduled; this has resulted in a lack of program continuity. One focus group agreed in an interview that there is not a structure for making sure students are getting a common experience at FVMMS. Another teacher voiced concern over the fact that one student had not been scheduled for specials activities (e.g., physical education) in two years, since it did not work within the constraints of the current schedule.

The FF team identified the following strengths in the domain of organizational structures and management that FVMMS can build upon as the school begins its improvement efforts.

The initial work of the current PIM team during the 05-06 school year is a good example of how change initiatives can be successfully structured and managed. Documents that resulted as part of these planning efforts were provided to the FF team in two three-ring binders. Although the PIM team has completed only a portion of the PIM process – and there has been some resistance in the identification of root causes – this type of work, nonetheless, is one example of systematic processes needed for improvement planning and change at FVMMS.

There has been strong attention given to student and family involvement during team meeting time. As stated in focus group interviews, this has made a big difference in student progress. Through good use of parent conferencing, families are more involved with student learning. As stated by one staff member, “Parent conferencing has brought about measurable change in behavior and performance.”

A second strength is the current school day schedule at FVMMS, which has the potential to better meet the needs of the school’s students and teachers. Designated meeting periods, for example, are already established. During focus group interviews, teachers expressed a desire for longer blocks of time to explore different teaching techniques. Since schedules on a particular team have some flexibility, possibilities for creative scheduling exist within the current schedule.

To address the areas in need of improvement, the FF team prioritized the following next steps for the FVMMS in the domain of organizational structures and management.

- **Ensure that all initiatives, projects and programs designed to contribute to the improvement of student performance are strategically selected, thoughtfully planned, thoroughly implemented and contain effective means for monitoring and evaluating success.** This should be rooted in measuring student performance and involves a use of a cyclical planning model that includes: reflect, decide, plan, implement and assess. This cycle is ongoing.
- **Care should be taken to involve large and representative groups of stakeholders to gain consensus around big decisions that impact the school's movement toward its vision for improvement; particularly with regard to those things that impact classroom practice.** In order to have the greatest impact on student performance, all FVMMS staff must be involved in and understand improvement planning, implementation and be open to feedback on related processes. While instruction has the greatest impact at the classroom level, the vision must begin with school leadership.
- **Maximize the use of every instructional minute in the day.** Start and end lessons on time. Ensure that available instructional time is used effectively and efficiently.
- **Improve the use of time available for professional collaboration. Create a structure for team meeting time that is agenda-driven, facilitated by a teacher leader that balances attention to inter-curricular, content curricula and grade-level issues.** Through creative scheduling, for example, groups of students could spend more time in a block, studying a particular topic, which also opens avenues for interdisciplinary lessons and creating group sizes appropriate for materials-intensive activities.

V: District Support

In combination with the findings above for the Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School, the FF team has identified the following strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations for the district in the domains of curriculum and instruction; culture and climate for learning; school leadership; and, organizational structures and management.

There has been a pronounced lack of appropriate district guidance and support for FVMMS that has contributed to the significant deficits cited in this report. The school is in dire need of large-scale and successful improvement initiatives. In order to bring about needed change at this school, district-level administrators must focus efforts at this school to address specific improvement priorities. It may be necessary for the district to seek outside assistance to ensure personnel are equipped to meet the challenges associated with the significant needs at FVMMS.

Domain I: Curriculum and Instruction

Based on the FF Team's findings, the district has made some contributions in the domain of curriculum and instruction at FVMMS. Resources – both human and financial – have been provided by the district to improve curriculum and instruction. It is the judgment of the FF team, however, that these efforts have been inadequate and that the school stands today with minimal

guidance in the areas of curriculum and instruction. Two major gaps at the district level include the absence of a district curriculum and the lack of a useful system to assess student progress at FVMMS.

It is impossible to implement consistent instructional practices and to ensure students are receiving the necessary content to be successful, without a consistent, standards-based curriculum. This is a major gap on the part of the district and requires immediate attention.

Although assessment programs have been selected for use by the district, these systems have not been properly deployed and, as a result, have not been effective. Not only has this left the school without important data to inform school improvement, it has created a feeling among staff that the district wastes money and is incapable of follow-through. As the school improvement efforts begin, the district must research and choose appropriate assessment vehicles that will meet the needs of the school and its struggling students. In addition, the implementation of assessment programs must be supported. This includes monitoring proper implementation of the assessment program, data collection and utilization.

Domain II: Climate and Culture for Learning

In the domain of culture and climate for learning, many strengths exist in student-to-staff relationships. Staff relationships and staff-leadership relationships, however, are not consistently supportive. Changes in staff and administration over the past five years have added to the lack of a consistent and unified vision throughout the school.

As improvement planning begins and new initiatives are established, the district must assert its presence to establish a common set of goals for both administrators and staff. High expectations must be set and enforced for all school employees to begin to install a consistent standard of accountability that is required to see necessary increases in student performance and learning at the school.

Domain III: School Leadership

The vision and potential of the school principal is a strength at FVMMS. The district is commended for the selection of this new leader. The FF team has some concern about success, however, without strong district support. This has been recognized by the district, who indicated, "We need to be more hands-on in terms of helping the principal. We need to look at this new principal and learn where her specific needs are." It is the judgment of the FF team that the district must provide support for school leadership in order to ensure the effectiveness of school improvement efforts.

In addition, district support is necessary to develop a solid core of instructional leaders within the school. The leadership team must have a unified vision for school improvement, include members from representative groups of the school's community and be capable of taking on the challenge of improvement. Training and resource support for these individuals (e.g., how to use assessment information to guide instruction, plan, conduct and follow through on staff trainings to ensure proper implementation of curriculum once developed) is essential to the success of this improvement effort.

Staff evaluations conducted over the years, using a district format, has yielded incorrect assessments of teacher skills and have not provided teachers with information upon which to improve their teaching practice. District administrators should redesign the teacher evaluation format to ensure that this important process is instructive and useful. It should include clear goals for professional growth and must be consistently applied to all professionals at expected intervals. Use the data collected to inform PD plans around faculty instructional weakness.

Poor leadership and a lack of management on the part of district employees has intensified weaknesses at the school and allowed them to continue for years. It is imperative that the district begin to address the instructional leadership and oversight needs at FVMMS. This challenge should be met with a sense of urgency.

Domain IV: Organizational Structures and Management

In the domain of organizational structures and management, the district has much room for growth. As previously indicated, efforts to create curriculum and establish assessment systems have failed in the past. Much of this is due to poor implementation practices and a lack of oversight by the district.

In moving forward, it is imperative that improvement efforts are carefully selected, implemented and monitored. This includes use of teacher planning time and instructional time. At the current time, the FVMMS requires significant attention in this area. The likelihood of success is much greater with district support. The district must work with school leadership to address areas of weakness at the school in this domain, in order to establish sound organizational structures and management practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the FF team found a number of deficits across all domains that have contributed to the low student performance rates at the Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School. Curriculum is in the early stages of development, and instruction has been poorly guided without sound assessment of teacher skills or student progress. While good behavior is the norm in classrooms, the culture and climate for learning among the adults in the school is rife with conflict. School leadership has endured many changes over the past four years, although the new principal appears to have the necessary vision to lead this school. Some organizational structures are in place but there is much room for improvement around how instructional time and professional meeting time are utilized. Because of the interconnectedness of these domains, improvement of these weaknesses will depend upon a concerted, consistent and thorough effort on the part of all stakeholders. District guidance and support, which has not been demonstrated in past years, will be essential to the success of this process.

APPENDIX A

Team Members

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* A Department of Education content area specialist participated in this Fact-Finding review, based on identification in the Panel Review Report of a need for focus on that area. The specialist functioned in the role of practitioner, which included observing classrooms within their area of expertise and reporting findings from observations back to the Core Team. The specialist was included as part of a pilot for future diagnostic reviews.

**Fairview Veterans Memorial Middle School
Chicopee Public Schools
FACT-FINDING REVIEW SCHEDULE
April 3-6, 2006**

This is a template schedule for a Fact-Finding visit. FF schedules were designed in collaboration with school principals and modified to reflect each specific school's day.

DAY ONE

CORE TEAM ONLY	
1:00	Core Team arrives at hotel
1:30 – 6:00	Core Team meets to summarize review of documents and plan for visit

DAY TWO

	CORE TEAM	PRACTITIONERS
7:30-7:45	Team arrives at school	
7:45 – 8:30	Team meeting	
8:30 – 8:45	Team tour of school	
8:45 – 9:30	Focus Groups	Classroom Observations
9:30 – 10:45	Meeting with SCHOOL Leadership	
10:45 – 12:00	Focus Groups	
12:00- 1:00	TEAM LUNCH, MID-DAY DEBRIEF	
1:00 – 2:30	Focus Groups	Classroom Observations
2:30 – 5:30	DOCUMENT REVIEWS, TEAM MEETING, DELIBERATIONS	

DAY THREE

	CORE TEAM	PRACTITIONERS
7:30-7:45	Team arrives at school	
7:45 – 8:15	Feedback to School Leadership	Classroom Observations
8:15 – 9:30	Focus Groups	
9:30 – 10:45	Meeting with DISTRICT Leadership	
10:45 – 12:00	Focus Groups	
12:00- 1:00	TEAM LUNCH, MID-DAY DEBRIEF	
1:00 – 2:30	Focus Groups	Classroom Observations
2:30 – 3:00	TEAM MEETING with PRACTITIONERS (Practitioners depart at 3:00)	
3:00 – 6:00	DELIBERATIONS – Core Team ONLY	

DAY FOUR

CORE TEAM ONLY	
7:30-7:45	Team arrives at school
7:45 – 8:15	Feedback to School Leadership
8:15 – 9:30	Focus Groups, follow up as needed
10:00 – 1:00	DELIBERATIONS
1:00 – 2:30	TEAM REPORT OUT with School and District Leadership
2:30	Team Departs