

School Panel Review Report Charlotte M. Murkland Elementary School Lowell 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 Charlotte M. Murkland Elementary School met this criterion and was one of 21 schools selected for panel review in Fall 2005. The panel review was conducted on December 19 and 20, 2005.

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 Charlotte M. Murkland Elementary 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.

Charlotte M. Murkland Elementary School Profile

Enrollment

The Charlotte M. Murkland Elementary School serves students in Grades Pre-K through 4. Enrollment at Murkland Elementary rose from 480 students in 2002 to 522 students in 2004, and then dropped to 481 students in 2005. Between 2002 and 2005, student demographics have varied slightly. The percentages of Black, Native American and Special Education students have remained stable overall. However, the percentages of Asian and Hispanic students have risen by seven percent and two percent respectively, while the percentage of White students has dropped by eight percent. The percentage of Low-Income students rose by three percent in 2003, and then dropped by seven percent from 2003 to 2005. Most significantly, the percentage of First Language Not English students rose by 35 percent in 2003, remained stable in 2004, and then

dropped by eight percent in 2005. The percentage of Limited English Proficient students rose by five percent in 2003, by another 18 percent in 2004, and then dropped by 15 percent in 2005. Murkland Elementary School's percentages of Low-Income, First Language Not English, and Limited English Proficient students are significantly above state averages. Proportions of Murkland Elementary School's student subgroups in 2005, as compared to state averages, are presented below:

Subgroup	2005 Enrollment (%)	
	School	State
Asian	53	5
Black	4	9
Hispanic	23	12
Native American	0	0.3
White	20	74
Low-Income	78	28
First Language Not English	48	14
Limited English Proficient	28	5
Special Education	14	16

In 2005, the attendance rate at Murkland Elementary was 93.8 percent, with students absent 9.9 days on average, representing slightly higher attendance rates than the district overall. Attendance rates are highest in the upper grades and lowest in the lower grades. On average, Hispanic students have higher rates of absenteeism than their Black, Asian and White counterparts. The school's retention rate was 0.8 percent in 2004, the last year for which this data is available. Murkland Elementary School's in-school suspension rate in 2005 was 0.2 percent, while out-of-school suspensions averaged 3.7 percent, a drop from the 2003 rate of 4.4 percent. Averages in 2005 for the state were 4.5 percent for in-school suspensions and 6.1 percent for out-of-school suspensions.

Staffing

The 2005-2006 Murkland Elementary staffing report indicates that the school is comprised of two administrators, 37 teachers, one school adjustment counselor, two teacher leader/curriculum facilitators, one long term substitute, and seven additional staff members. The principal has been at the school for four years and has a total of 17 years of administrative experience. Of the teachers, approximately 46 percent have been at the school since it opened 13 years ago. Almost 24 percent have been at the school between five and twelve years, and nearly 11 percent have been at the school for two years or less. The teachers at Murkland Elementary average just over 21 years of teaching experience, with only about 16 percent having less than ten years teaching experience. Roughly 94 percent of teachers are reported as highly qualified, and approximately 62 percent of teachers hold an advanced degree.

MCAS Overview

Students at the Murkland Elementary School are assessed in Grades 3 and 4 in English language arts (ELA) and in Grade 4 in mathematics. Murkland's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report for 2005 Mid-Cycle IV shows an accountability status of Identified for Improvement for English language arts and Corrective Action for mathematics. The school failed to make AYP in ELA in

2005 for the aggregate population and for all reported subgroups: Limited English Proficient, Low-Income, and Asian or Pacific Islander.¹ The school has not made AYP in ELA for three years, after making AYP in 2001 and 2002 in the aggregate. In mathematics, the school failed to make AYP in 2005 for the aggregate population and for all reported subgroups. The school did not make AYP in mathematics from 1999 to 2002, made AYP in 2003 for both the aggregate and all reported subgroups, and then did not make AYP in either the aggregate or reported subgroups in 2004 and 2005.

In 2005, the aggregate Composite Performance Indices (CPIs) for the Murkland Elementary School were 51.8 in ELA and 37.2 in mathematics. Year-by-year aggregate CPIs are shown below:

Year-by-Year Aggregate CPI Data Summary		
Year	ELA	Math
2001	57.7	40.3
2002	57.1	38.7
2003	58.1	43.8
2004	58.7	46.3
2005	51.8	37.2
State Target 2005	80.5	68.7

GRADE 3

Reading MCAS Results

Results of the 2005 Grade 3 Reading MCAS for students at Murkland Elementary are presented below:

2005 Reading	Percent		
	P	NI	W/F
Aggregate	24	42	35
Regular Education	37	39	24
Special Education	0	36	64
Limited English Proficient	8	50	42

Regular Education students significantly outperformed both Special Education and Limited English Proficient students in Grade 3 Reading. Student performance since 2001 has varied, as reflected in the aggregate Grade 3 Reading MCAS performance shown on the next page:

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 (or 5% of the total number of students assessed, whichever is greater) per subgroup is required to issue a statistically sound rating or determination of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The subgroups meeting the minimum sample size at Charlotte M. Murkland Elementary School in 2005 were Limited English Proficient, Low-Income, and Asian or Pacific Islander.

Aggregate Reading	Percent		
	P	NI	W/F
2005	24	42	35
2004	22	59	18
2003	33	45	22
2002	33	50	18
2001	27	54	19

The percentage of students scoring Proficient has ranged from a low of 22 percent in 2004 to a high of 33 percent in 2002 and 2003. The percentage of students scoring Warning/Failing hit a low of 18 percent in 2004 and 2002, increasing to a high of 35 percent in 2005. The following historical performance of Special Education and Limited English Proficient students shows similar variability, but again highlights the differences in performance when compared to Regular Education students.

Special Education Reading	Percent		
	P	NI	W/F
2005	0	36	64
2004	8	62	31
2003	0	50	50
2002	9	73	18
2001	4	42	54

Limited English Proficient Reading	Percent		
	P	NI	W/F
2005	8	50	42
2004	16	62	22
2003	6	44	50
2002	6	31	63
2001	6	76	18

Special Education performance hit a low in 2005, with 64 percent of students scoring Warning/Failing and the remaining 36 percent scoring Needs Improvement. This is following several years of low performance. 2002 represented the highest scores for Special Education students, when nine percent scored Proficient, 73 percent scored Needs Improvement, and 18 percent scored Warning/Failing. Limited English Proficient students have typically scored better than Special Education students, but still experience a wide gap in performance when compared to Regular Education students.

GRADE 4

ELA MCAS Results

Results of the 2005 Grade 4 ELA MCAS for students at Murkland Elementary are presented below:

2005 ELA	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
Aggregate	1	8	45	45
Regular Education	3	14	54	30
Special Education	0	7	21	71
Limited English Proficient	0	3	46	51

As in Grade 3, the performance of Regular Education students has been significantly higher than that of Special Education and Limited English Proficient students. There has been a gradual increase in student performance since 2001 with a decrease in 2005, as reflected in the aggregate Grade 4 ELA MCAS performance shown below:

Aggregate ELA	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
2005	1	8	45	45
2004	0	13	48	39
2003	0	11	50	39
2002	0	12	46	42
2001	0	12	43	44

The percentage of students scoring Warning/Failing declined slightly from 44 percent in 2001 to 39 percent in 2003 & 2004, but then rose again to 45 percent in 2005. This is also the first year that any students scored Advanced, although the total percentage of students scoring Advanced and Proficient was at a five-year low of nine percent.

Special Education students and Limited English Proficient (LEP) students both performed below their Regular Education counterparts, although in different ways. For 2005, Special Education students have a higher percentage of students scoring Proficient (seven percent vs. three percent), but also have a higher percentage of students scoring Warning/Failing (71 percent vs. 51 percent). LEP student performance is more concentrated in Needs Improvement (46 percent vs. 21 percent). The history of Special Education and LEP students' performance levels are shown below and on the next page:

Special Education ELA	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
2005	0	7	21	71
2004	0	6	24	71
2003	0	6	35	59
2002	0	11	17	72
2001	0	0	13	87

Limited English Proficient ELA	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
2005	0	3	46	51
2004	0	9	45	45
2003	0	4	36	61
2002	0	0	23	77
2001	0	0	8	92

Special Education performance was lowest in 2001 with 87 percent of students scoring Warning/Failing. In the following year, a high of 11 percent of students scored Proficient even though 72 percent remained in Warning/Failing. From 2003 to 2005 the percentage of students scoring Proficient stayed at six to seven percent, while the percentage scoring Warning/Failing dropped to 59 percent and then rose to 71 percent for two years. The performance of Limited English Proficient students reflected a more direct trend toward improvement. From 2001 to 2004, student performance rose steadily from a high of 92 percent in Warning/Failing to a low of 45 percent. Simultaneously, the percentage of students scoring Proficient rose from a low of zero percent to a high of nine percent. However, performance dipped in 2005 when three percent of students scored Proficient and 51 percent of students scored Warning/Failing.

GRADE 4

Mathematics MCAS Results

Results of the 2005 Grade 4 Mathematics MCAS for students at Murkland Elementary are presented below:

2005 Math	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
Aggregate	1	3	33	63
Regular Education	3	5	41	51
Special Education	0	0	14	86
Limited English Proficient	0	3	31	66

Regular Education students have significantly outperformed Special Education students, but have performed similarly to Limited English Proficient students. There has been a gradual increase in aggregate student performance since 2001, with the exception of 2005, as reflected in the aggregate Grade 4 Mathematics MCAS performance shown below:

Aggregate Math	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
2005	1	3	33	63
2004	0	14	41	45
2003	1	10	40	49
2002	2	4	36	57
2001	0	7	36	58

Student performance increased steadily from 2001 to 2004. The percentage of students scoring Advanced or Proficient rose from a low of six percent (in 2002) to a high of 14 percent in 2004. Correspondingly, the percentage of students scoring Warning/Failing decreased from 58 percent

to a low of 45 percent. However, in 2005 performance dropped slightly, with four percent of students scoring Advanced or Proficient and 63 percent of students scoring Warning/Failing. A similar pattern can be seen in the percentages of students scoring Needs Improvement.

The performance of Special Education students has varied over time, showing only inconsistent movement between performance categories, as demonstrated below:

Special Education Math	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
2005	0	0	14	86
2004	0	0	18	82
2003	6	0	12	82
2002	0	6	17	78
2001	0	0	7	93

In 2002, the percentage of students scoring Warning/Failing decreased to 78 percent from 93 percent the prior year. However, from 2003 to 2005, that percentage rose to 86 percent. In 2001, 2004 and 2005, zero percent of students scored Advanced or Proficient. Yet in 2002, six percent of students scored Proficient, and in 2003, six percent of students scored Advanced while zero percent scored Proficient. The percentage of students scoring Needs Improvement varied each year, but ranged between seven percent and 18 percent over the five-year span.

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?

The administration and faculty of Murkland Elementary are implementing a sound plan for improvement, and have demonstrated an ongoing willingness to evaluate and revise the plan as needed. However, a more focused examination of the causes of low student performance would aid teachers in understanding what is expected of them in the classroom. Although the school is unable to show improvement in MCAS scores at this time, student performance data is being actively collected in literacy and is at the beginning stages in mathematics, for the purpose of guiding instruction. The most significant behavior gains reported include an increase in teachers' focus on data analysis and instructional improvement at the Murkland School.

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

School Improvement Plans (SIPs) were submitted in preparation for School Panel Reviews scheduled in November and December 2005. Teams of three Department of Education (DOE) 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 documents provided in the summary rubric was based solely on a close reading of the written documents submitted. It was not a final determination. The panelists used the summary rubric to inform their discussion of the written plan each panelist had read individually prior to the review, and to help focus their time in the school on the implementation of the planned strategies. Final judgment on the soundness of the school's plan—and the panel's overall response to Key Question 1 in the Panel Review Protocol—depended upon further information about the development of the plan and evidence of the plan's implementation that was gathered by the panel during on-site interviews, focus groups and observations.

The Department reviewers determined that the Unified School Improvement Plan (USIP) submitted by Charlotte Murkland Elementary School was "sound with qualifications." The rubric stated that,

Overall, the plan presents a 'big picture' of the major initiatives underway in the school to improve student performance. As currently articulated, the plan is not a sufficient road map for individual teachers to understand what is expected of them in implementing the plan. The causal analysis lists student weaknesses and does not identify the root causes of those weaknesses that are within the school's control. Although the strategies described in the plan appear sound, because the causal analysis is insufficient, it is difficult to judge whether the strategies are well chosen.

Evidence to support this conclusion included the following:

- The school considered multiple forms of data in its analysis.
- The school discontinued the identification of limited English proficient (LEP) students because of a narrowed gap with respect to the aggregate population. However, this should not preclude the school from specifically targeting this group, because the aggregate scores declined more than LEP scores, LEP students make up 30% of the student population, and strategies intended to improve the performance of LEP students must still be evaluated.
- Goals are aligned with Annual Yearly Progress (AYP).
- Student learning objectives for ELA and Math are provided but not articulated with reference to specific learning standards.
- The causes are framed in terms of student weaknesses and do not address the core issues of curriculum, instruction and assessment.
- Strategies appear targeted toward areas over which the school has control.
- The action plans do not articulate clear steps or timelines for accomplishing the strategies.
- The plan contains implementation and outcome benchmarks.

The Panel Review (PR) Team agreed with the Department's analysis of the USIP. The Murkland has analyzed data from the 2004 MCAS in order to identify student weaknesses in both ELA and math. In addition, the school has recently completed a more thorough analysis of the 2005 MCAS results, as evidenced by the 2005-2007 USIP Addendum dated December 1, 2005. Of key concern to the PR Team was the section in the executive summary of the 2005 USIP entitled "Key Causal Findings," in which there is a list of external factors (e.g., students come to school with limited academic vocabulary or background knowledge) as potential causes of the weaknesses identified in the analysis work. These factors are important and significant, and strategies have been written in the plan to address them (e.g., instruction needs to be focused on "Tier 2" words and teachers need to increase use of "interactive word walls"). However, the plan does not contain evidence that there has been the same focus on identifying internal causes for low student performance, such as gaps in the curriculum or difficulties that teachers may be having with the teaching of certain skill sets.

The school produced a "2005-07 USIP Addendum" following analysis of the results of the 2005 MCAS. The process of examining the data and sharing it with the faculty and staff was similar to that as described in Key Questions 1B. Although the document produced has many strengths, it still lacks thorough examination of classroom practices in relation to student weaknesses identified for improvement. The PR Team was encouraged by a separate document provided by the principal in which he attempted to redefine the causes to reflect needed changes in classroom instruction and school programs that better match the intentions of the strategies detailed in the USIP.

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

The PR Team determined that the Murkland USIP was developed through a multi-layered process that is likely to support its successful implementation. The USIP development involved a large range of stakeholders. The use of data as part of this process continues to evolve as well as

systems for monitoring the implementation of the USIP. Professional development at the school and in the district is linked to improvement goals.

The current USIP was developed with input from a large portion of the school community. In preparation for the writing of the 2005-2007 USIP, the principal expanded the Literacy and Math Teams, which included representatives from each grade level as well as Title I and special education teachers. These teams were responsible for conducting an in-depth analysis of the 2004 MCAS data and identifying weaknesses to be targeted in the plan. This information was then presented to the faculty and staff for discussion and feedback purposes during weekly grade level common planning time. In addition, the School Site Council was involved through research of school community programs—leading to the choice of the Caring School Community Program “to establish an atmosphere of safety and mutual respect”—and provided input regarding parental involvement initiatives.

In interviews and corroborated in the leadership report completed for the Panel Review, the Team was informed that this expanded involvement and focus on data analysis has evolved over the past several years. During the 2002-03 school year, Murkland’s USIP team received initial training in the elements of PIM planning. During the 2004-05 school year, all Lowell administrators and literacy specialists participated in monthly sessions focused on a modified Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) process. In addition, the Murkland was one of seven schools in Lowell that participated in a district review process. The review included a site visit by a Lowell School Review team, which made several recommendations concerning the school’s USIP. These recommendations were then incorporated into the current plan.

School and district administrators are actively monitoring implementation of the USIP. Formal classroom observations and informal classroom walkthroughs, conducted by both the principal and the assistant principal, provide evaluation data on the plan’s implementation. The assistant principal and literacy specialist attend common planning time meetings once per month and focus on literacy issues, while the principal and math resource teacher do the same for mathematics. According to the principal, these meetings also provide opportunities to support and to monitor implementation. The Literacy Team, chaired by the assistant principal and literacy specialist, and the Math Team, chaired by the principal and math resource teacher, each meet once or twice a month. These team meetings provide another opportunity for discussion about plan implementation. Additionally, the superintendent makes two to three visits per year to each school to check for progress on goal attainment, to discuss implementation obstacles, and to talk to the principal and teachers. However, the December 1st USIP Addendum suggests that changes to the written document are primarily driven by analyses of newly acquired MCAS data.

Professional development on the district and school levels continues to be linked with goals and objectives outlined in the USIP as well as with the implementation of district initiatives in ELA, mathematics and for English language learners (ELL). Through interviews and a review of professional development calendars for the past several years, the PR Team saw an organized effort to address the professional needs of the teachers and staff. The 2005-06 District Professional Development Plan states,

Lowell Public Schools needs to examine our teaching practices to ensure that we are using strategies that help our students reach high levels of learning. Lowell Public Schools recognize that quality professional development is one of the key strategies for supporting significant improvements in teaching and learning.

The district offers professional development opportunities that directly relate to improvement initiatives.

This is evident in the abundant professional development provided for the *Math Investigations* program. The current academic year is the final year of a 3-year phase-in implementation schedule set by the district. Teachers receive one full day of training prior to the introduction of each unit. This year, third and fourth grade teachers will receive two days of training and kindergarten, first and second grade teachers will receive one training day. Coaches also participate in district sponsored professional development twice a month to focus on strengthening math and literacy content and strategies to use in working with teachers.

In addition, school level professional development includes the Literacy and Math Brigades, in which substitutes are provided for all teachers on a grade level in order to provide time for extended curricular work. These grade-level content-area Brigades will each meet three times for two hours this year. Their work will include consultations with a Scott-Foresman reading trainer, training in the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy (DIBELS) reading assessment, development of Murkland Math Assessments (school-wide assessments being piloted at all grade levels this year), and learning to use a standards-based protocol for assessing student work. Furthermore, seven additional days of training for ELL teachers are scheduled this year. Seventeen teachers have already received training in administering and scoring the Massachusetts English Language Assessment-Oral (MELA-O) with 16 more in training at this time. Thirty-two teachers have received Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) training, with 13 more Murkland staff members registered for this school year.

Finally, the school has made efforts to communicate the contents of the USIP to various members of the school community. Each staff member received a complete copy of the USIP on Orientation Day, prior to the opening of school, and the main goals were summarized in a presentation at that time. Parents on the School Site Council, while chiefly contributing to the parent involvement and school climate parts of the plan, were also aware of the school's focus on improving math and literacy, as were several of the other parents interviewed.

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

The PR Team consistently noted through observations and interviews that the mathematics and literacy strategies written in the plan are being implemented at the Murkland. ELA strategies include a focus on comprehension strategies, progress monitoring, the Murkland Writing Calendar, and promotion of oral language skills. Mathematics strategies include continued implementation of *Math Investigations* with a focus on identified areas of weakness, identification of resources for teaching state standards not addressed by *Investigations*, implementation of a school-wide math assessment including progress monitoring, and refining use of daily math journals. Additionally, two major strategies for all content areas include an increased emphasis on vocabulary and improved use of Sheltered English Instruction strategies. Separate strategies for special education students, safe and respectful climate, and family involvement are also included in the plan.

Math Investigations is a K-5 prescriptive math program aligned with the state standards and the Lowell Math Curriculum. It was chosen, in part, by the district to ensure a uniform approach to math instruction on the elementary level. The review team observed 10 classrooms, divided between math and ELA subject areas and on several grade levels. *Investigations* emphasizes a

“launch, explore, summary” lesson structure as well as explanation of thinking (draw, show and tell about your work). The panelists saw these elements being utilized by the teachers in all math classes observed. For example, in one fourth grade class students supported the lesson by writing the instructions they needed to follow in order to complete the lesson. Manipulatives were also used in all observed lessons and references to the Math vocabulary word walls displayed in all rooms were frequent. In addition, the panel viewed documents indicating that Murkland Math Assessments have been created at all grade levels and that work to identify standards not addressed by *Investigations* has begun.

The school received a Reading First grant in 2003 and subsequently adopted the Scott-Foresman Reading series. The school has also adopted *Making Meaning*, a comprehension program that also teaches social competency through student-to-student interactions, and panelists observed some of its strategies being used during guided reading activities. In several instances, students were encouraged to refer to the literacy word walls in their rooms. The school is actively collecting student performance data from both the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE) and DIBELS to identify at-risk students for remediation.

Teachers are in the first year of implementing the Murkland Writing Calendar (adapted from the Lowell Public School Standards-Based Writing Program). They are currently refining a rubric to be used in assessing the students’ work across grade levels. Panelists observed lessons in which children were encouraged to talk about aspects of the lesson with a partner (i.e., think, pair, and share) that is in line with the school’s goal to increase students’ vocabulary and interaction with each other.

In addition, the principal has also worked to configure available funding sources to support the USIP strategies. This year he is using funding from the Reading First grant for two reading tutors to provide small group support in classrooms, Title I funding for a math tutor for students at risk in that subject (but only for 3rd and 4th graders), and a 21st Century grant to support an after school program that includes daily homework support and academic and enrichment classes.

The PR Team noted numerous respectful conversations between teachers and students during the visit. In classes with ELL and/or Special Education students, additional teachers or paraprofessionals were integrated into the lessons and worked effectively in the differentiated groups. Students were familiar with classroom routines and took an active part in the lessons. Evidence of the SIOP training teachers received (e.g., repetition of key phrases, concrete and verbal examples, hand gestures to guide and illustrate) were observed in some classes.

In summary, the Murkland Elementary School is actively implementing improvement strategies cited in the USIP. Mathematics instruction is focused on areas of identified student achievement weakness. Beyond the Scott-Foresman Reading program, the school has implemented several other initiatives to support student learning in ELA.

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

As the current USIP under implementation spans the 2005-07 school years, it is too early to be able to show measurable gains from standardized testing. In the past, the school has relied on an in-depth analysis of the Grade 3 Reading and Grade 4 ELA and math scores to provide the most detailed data for analysis. Terra Nova testing in third and fourth grades was also used, but provided limited information. Formative assessments available to the school are more prevalent

in ELA since the Reading First program is in its third year. These include DIBELS (a test for fluency) and GRADE (a test for comprehension), as well as unit assessments from the Scott-Foresman program. DIBELS progress monitoring for at-risk students, began last year and will be fully implemented this year. The principal indicated in the leadership report that the school needs to look at using data from the DIBELS and GRADE to establish possible school-wide trends in student performance.

Since the *Investigations* Math program is just now nearing full implementation, the majority of formative assessment data available comes from the unit assessments. The Murkland Math Assessments, based on standards for each grade level, will be given three times this year as a pilot program. Math journals for each student are in their fourth year, but are being refined to provide a more standardized gauge of student progress.

Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA) results from 2004-05 show student gains of 17.9 in the overall average scaled score, which was higher than both the district and the state.

Anecdotally, Murkland teachers and administrators report a number of achievements that have resulted from plan implementation. These include an increase in focused collaboration as a result of common planning time, a growing level of comfort with the *Math Investigations* program, a raised awareness and use of data analysis and assessment tools, and student internalization of targeted learning strategies and behaviors.

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

The conditions at the Murkland appear to be in place for the successful implementation of the USIP. The school principal is a good organizational leader and has a clear vision for improvement that is supported by the district and school personnel. The commitment of Murkland faculty and staff is evidenced in their implementation efforts (Key Question 1C) and in their belief in the school's improvement efforts. District leadership is well informed of the school's needs and provides resources to support implementation of the plan.

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

The principal, who has been in his position since 2002, is clearly viewed as the instructional leader of the school. The principal has demonstrated his vision of creating "a climate of reflective practice" through communication, by fostering a broad range of involvement, and reacting to the needs of the school's faculty and students.

Communication

- Distribution of a "two-pager" at the beginning of the school year. This was a two-page commentary, addressed to faculty and staff, thoughtfully addressing several themes for the year and connecting them to the goals of the USIP. The themes for this year are Caring and High Expectations, Common Periodic Assessments and Deepening Implementation of the Curriculum.
- Distribution of "Murkland Staff Matters," a weekly calendar of events with narratives about activities that are personally written and respectful of teachers' time.
- Distribution of "Family Bulletin," a weekly communication to parents.

Fostering a Broad Range of Involvement

- Parents and teachers on the School Site Council, as well as other parents interviewed report that the principal has a proactive parent involvement attitude.
- Establishment of the mathematics team with broad representation and expansion of the role of both an existing literacy team and the new mathematics team to include data analysis and school improvement planning.
- Use of common planning time to broaden participation in the development of the USIP.

Reacting to Needs

- Identification of the need for a standards-based Math program at the school, and subsequent involvement with the district committee that led to the adoption of the *Investigations* program.
- Effective use of the Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) to give support to teachers in dealing with children posing special challenges.
- Reorganization of common planning time, so that it is agenda driven (literacy, math, students, and grade level time) on a four-week rotating basis.
- Institution of math and literacy theme nights and expansion of literacy theme and other informational nights to create parental interest and participation in achieving school goals.
- Institution of All School Meetings, held by the principal on a weekly basis, showcasing different teacher or student led activities as an effort to build a sense of community in the school.

Murkland leaders view classroom observations and evaluations as an important part of school improvement. Sample anonymous teacher observations and evaluations show detailed feedback given to teachers by administrators. The superintendent also confirmed that teachers at the Murkland School are held accountable for their performance. In addition to providing feedback to individual teachers, this practice provides a rich source of information on current instructional practice for ongoing school improvement planning.

The principal at the Murkland School is strongly supported by the school's faculty and the superintendent. On the anonymous *DOE Instructional Staff Survey*, 100% of teachers 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." Across the board, the teachers credit the principal with bringing a sense of organization to the school and a focus on assessment and data analysis. The superintendent also voiced support for the instructional leadership of the principal, stating, "He is very tuned into instruction with his school."

In summary, it is the judgment of the PR Team that leadership at the Murkland Elementary School has the vision and to guide improvement efforts at the school, both in instructional and organizational capacities. The principal is strongly supported by the school's faculty and staff.

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

There is evidence to suggest that the Murkland faculty supports the planned improvement efforts. The faculty is well informed about the school's improvement initiatives, reports that the school

has a well-defined plan for improvement and believes that the curriculum being implemented is effective and appropriate.

In response to an open-ended question on the *DOE Instructional Staff Survey*, many teachers cited external factors such as poverty, second language learners, lack of parental involvement, student behavior and lack of prior academic skills as reasons for low achievement. While this initially presented some concern to the PR Team, during interviews conducted with teachers and administrators while on site, these external factors were not described as barriers to achievement, but rather as weaknesses that can potentially be remediated. The school's administration and staff used the school improvement planning process to identify strategies to address these weaknesses, such as the Caring School Community Program, parent involvement activities and strategies linked to vocabulary and literacy enhancement. Teachers support these strategies and are working to implement them.

A review of the *DOE Instructional Staff Survey* results shows an overwhelming percentage of respondents feel that the school has a well-defined plan for reaching student goals. In response to the statement, "Our school has a well-defined plan for reaching student performance goals," 96% of teachers either "agreed" or "strongly agreed." When asked about their confidence in the USIP strategies, teachers felt that their efforts would eventually be fruitful, but that more time is needed for implementation, especially in regards to the Math program. They also cited the need for more assistance in the classroom when working with at-risk students. However, as documented in Key Question 1C, the Murkland faculty and staff is clearly implementing strategies cited in the USIP, and have confidence in the curricular programs that are currently in place. Teachers expressed frustration at the drop in scores on the 2005 MCAS, but also indicated that as a result, they have intensified efforts to implement the strategies in the USIP.

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

The Murkland School is receiving adequate guidance and implementation support from the Lowell Public Schools. The district has provided the school with a number of resources to support improvement efforts. The district additionally supports the school through review of the USIP.

Interviews with both district and school leadership clearly demonstrated that the district is aware of the school's needs and has provided support in several areas, including:

- Securing a Reading First grant for Murkland School.
- Adoption of the *Terc Math Investigations* program with appropriate professional development. The program was phased in over three years.
- Continuing MELA-O and SIOP training opportunities for teachers working with ELL students.
- Targeted monthly professional development days for the literacy specialist and math coach.
- Initiation of the "Lowell New Teacher Academy," a comprehensive induction program for new teachers including a three credit on-site graduate course.

In addition to physical and training resources, the district has provided Murkland with personnel and data reports to assist in the development of the USIP. A Coordinator of School Improvement is available to work with all Lowell schools in developing the USIP. During the 2004-05 school

year, the district provided monthly sessions focused on a modified PIM process to all Lowell administrators and literacy specialists. Also during the 2004-05 school year, Murkland was one of the schools chosen to participate in a district school review process that included a site visit by a visiting team of administrators and consultants. All Lowell schools are provided with access to data analysis using a Filemaker Pro database that enables reports to be produced at the individual student level, subgroup level, or for the entire grade. MCAS, Terra Nova, MELA-O/MELA and reading assessment data are included in this database.

USIP plans are reviewed on the district level by a five-person team representing various content areas. The plan is returned to the school if deficiencies are found. In an interview with the superintendent, the absence of a sufficient causal analysis in the Murkland USIP was acknowledged. The superintendent reported that this was discussed with the principal when the plan was reviewed. However, the Coordinator of School Improvement had left the position at this time, and further work to address this weakness in the USIP was slowed as a result.

In summary, it is the judgment of the PR Team that the district is providing the Murkland with sufficient support and guidance to help facilitate improvement at the school.

CONCLUSION

The Murkland Elementary School is currently implementing a generally sound School Improvement Plan. The USIP was developed through a process that is likely to support its implementation, which includes an evolving use of student performance data. The absence of a thorough causal analysis of student weaknesses that address core issues of curriculum, instruction and assessment is likely to be addressed by this process in the future. Staff members are actively implementing strategies cited in the USIP. Though formal gains cannot be reported as a result of USIP implementation at this time, Murkland leadership and faculty anecdotally reports positive gains for students.

The school currently possesses a highly competent leadership team, both at the school and district levels. The principal has the respect of the school's community, and has implemented several effective changes since taking his position in 2002. The district leadership is well informed of the needs of the school and has provided a district framework including both human and financial resources to support the school's improvement efforts.

APPENDIX A
Team Members

Joseph Trunk, Panel Review Chair, SchoolWorks LLC, Beverly, MA

Emily Finkel, Panel Coordinator, Massachusetts Department of Education, Malden, MA

Mary M. Bourque, Panelist, Assistant Superintendent, Chelsea Public Schools, Chelsea, MA

Maryellen Duffy, Ed.D., Panelist, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Hamilton-Wenham Regional School District, Wenham, MA

APPENDIX B
Charlotte M. Murkland Elementary School
Lowell Public Schools
POTENTIALLY UNDER-PERFORMING PANEL REVIEW SCHEDULE
December 19 and 20, 2005

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.