

Fact Finding Review – Fall 2006
George Dunbar Elementary School
New Bedford Public Schools

Introduction

The diagnostic fact finding review at under-performing Schools is a cooperative process designed to provide objective, constructive feedback about the adequacy, appropriateness, and effectiveness of teaching and learning in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics at the School, and the enabling elements that make instructional improvement possible.

Beginning with the District and School’s understanding of the most pressing needs in four key areas; and their working hypotheses regarding the primary reasons for low student performance, the fact finders examine those key areas independently to verify, clarify, and deepen those understandings. At the same time, the fact finders will examine instructional leadership at the District and School levels to identify strengths to build on, and diagnose weaknesses that may be impeding District and School improvement efforts.

The resulting Fact Finding Report offers clear findings and priority recommendations for action at the District level and for each School. District and School leadership teams will use the recommendations from the report to complete a final District intervention plan for the School. This plan will be submitted to the Commissioner and the state Board of Education.

Overview of Report Structure

The Fact Finding Report opens with findings and recommendations at the district level that are related to the reasons and conditions in place that have contributed to the low levels of student performance in mathematics and English language arts. This Executive Summary answers the question, “What are the systemic reasons for the low levels of student performance in the district?” The Executive Summary summarizes the district analysis of reasons for underperformance, as presented in the District Plan for School Intervention and the trends across all schools in relation to the fact finding team findings.

The report also contains information specific to the team’s findings at each school. The school reports are organized around the four key areas of inquiry: standards-based teaching and learning; informing practice with data; time for teachers and students; and, leadership for instructional improvement. Under each key area of inquiry, the report contains findings, supported by data and evidence collected through document review, focus group interviews and classroom visits. Linked to these findings are recommendations for improvement.

In the New Bedford Public Schools, the George H. Dunbar School was visited on October 3 and 4, 2006.

Executive Summary – District Level

Systemic reasons for the low levels of student performance in mathematics and English language arts

The following tables show MCAS performance in ELA and Mathematics between 2004 and 2006 at the George Dunbar School, with District comparisons and trends.

Grade 3 ELA Reading

	2004		2005			2006		
	School	District	School	Change From '04	District	School	Change From '05	District
Proficient Plus or Proficient	37	48	32	-5	44	27	-5	40
Needs Improvement	53	43	63	+10	48	67	+4	50
Warning/Failing	11	9	5	-6	n/a	6	+1	10

Grade 3 Math

	2004		2005			2006		
	School	District	School	Change From '04	District	School	Change From '05	District
Proficient	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	n/a	32
Needs Improvement	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	73	n/a	42
Warning/Failing	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	27	n/a	25

Grade 4 ELA

	2004		2005			2006		
	School	District	School	Change From '04	District	School	Change From '05	District
Advanced or Proficient	33	32	5	-28	50	11	-6	25
Needs Improvement	48	57	79	+31	61	56	-23	55
Warning/Failing	19	12	16	+3	16	33	+17	20

Grade 4 Math

	2004		2005			2006		
	School	District	School	Change From '04	District	School	Change From '05	District
Advanced or Proficient	0	26	0	0	25	0	0	19
Needs Improvement	48	56	63	+15	54	61	-2	57
Warning/Failing	52	18	37	-15	22	39	+2	23

Grade 5 ELA

	2004		2005			2006		
	School	District	School	Change From '04	District	School	Change From '05	District
Advanced or Proficient	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	n/a	34
Needs Improvement	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	65	n/a	50
Warning/Failing	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	35	n/a	16

Grade 5 Math

	2004		2005			2006		
	School	District	School	Change From '04	District	School	Change From '05	District
Advanced or Proficient	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	n/a	23
Needs Improvement	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	35	n/a	42
Warning/Failing	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	65	n/a	35

Summary Trend Analysis

Data shows that any significant gains made in the year 2005 were lost in 2006. Students in the Warning/Failing category appear to remain almost unchanged. In Grade 3 ELA the School shows significant gains in moving students from Warning/Failing to Needs Improvement since 2004. However, over the same period the number of students achieving Proficiency reduced. The most significant lost ground is in Grade 4 ELA: over the three year period the number of students achieving proficiency reduced and the number of students in both the Warning/Needs Improvement and Failing

categories increased. The most significant gains are in Grade 4 math, which shows a 13% gain in the math W/F category in two years.

The noticeable District-wide endeavors from the 2005-2006 school year have been: support from the School Support Specialist who regularly visited the school to work alongside the principal and staff to analyze performance data. Support from the School Support Specialist through one on one meetings with the principal. The District has also provided a principal coach (the principal joined the School in 2005, having not been a principal before). The coach is a former principal of good standing and a reading specialist. At the time of the review she had met with school leadership twice and future visits were being planned to address instructional leadership issues. . The principal is attending the National Institute for School Leadership program and also participating in a principal/peer review program that will enable her to look at student learning in other Schools, and have peer principals advise her on instructional management at her own School. The District has invested in a math initiative through Mass Insight to provide elementary teachers with increased math skills. Most recently the District has identified a reading coach who will work with Schools that have not been part of the “Reading First” program to transfer some of the good practice from that program.

The noticeable School-wide endeavors from the 2005-2006 school year have been: an instructional focus on genre studies, non-fiction, vocabulary development, and identifying and analyzing elements of plot, character, and setting in stories. There is a School-wide bulletin board on these topic as well as activities and stories planned at each grade level that focus on these topics. Students’ vocabulary skills are being strengthened. Sustained Silent Reading and Guided Reading takes place in all grades as do Read-Alouds.

Reasons for underperformance

The District administration has failed to come to a clear decision on the future of the School, which despite its very small size, is the oldest School in the city and attracts significant political support. For several years while the debate over the School’s future has played out, the threat of closure has hung over Dunbar making it a difficult choice for teachers and, to some extent, parents. There has been a resulting high turnover of staff (40% of teachers opening the School for the 2006 academic year were new to Dunbar). This high turnover in staff, together with changes in School leadership, has resulted in perceived and real instability that has affected the morale of the faculty and parents, and the continuity of professional development at the School.

The recently appointed principal has been very successful in stabilizing the School in terms of culture, climate and student behavior. The principal told the team, however, that curriculum, instruction and assessment were less her strength. She has engaged the faculty and provided some instructional leadership but there is currently insufficient knowledge, overall, of the standards based classroom and assessment practice to take the School to the next stage and improve student achievement.

However, supported by the District, the School administration and staff are in the process of disaggregating 2006 test scores and updating their School Improvement Plan (SIP). They have discovered that answers to MCAS exam Open Response question results were noticeably poor and that

students lack the ability to analyze information and deduce answers. They believe this is in part a result of unfamiliarity with the cultural material in which the questions are embedded.

The School appears to be on target with the objectives of the SIP, but writing skills and techniques for answering Open Response questions have not been incorporated in all content areas and there is insufficient regular practice of test taking strategies. Because of the turnover of staff, identified teaching strategies have not been adequately embedded. For example, each class has a word wall and vocabulary instruction at different levels, but word walls do not appear to be used proactively. Another example is the School's efforts at identifying learning objectives through systematic data analysis, year by year. Again, this does not translate to action in all classrooms largely because of staff turnover and lack of consistent instructional leadership.

Recommendations

1 The District must:

- Make a decision this year about whether the George Dunbar School is to remain open or to close.

2 If the George Dunbar School is to remain open, the District must:

- Take proactive management steps to ensure stability of staffing at the School, and to avoid the repetition of the rapid staff turnover of recent years;
- Provide adequate instructional leadership for the School - the work of the School support specialist and the instructional coaches is a good foundation for this work; and
- Provide professional development support to ensure that teachers are able to identify the steps they need to take to move students to proficiency and to coach teachers, modeling where necessary, the appropriate instructional methodologies and techniques.

Following this Executive Summary is the School report. The School report is organized around the four key areas of inquiry: standards based teaching and learning; informing practice with data; time for teachers and students; and leadership for instructional improvement. Under each key area of inquiry, the report contains findings, supported by data and evidence collected through document review, focus group interviews, classroom observations, and student shadowing.

George H. Dunbar School

Standards Based Teaching and Learning

Finding: Planning is not consistent with a standards based environment of high achievement; this has been acknowledged and actively addressed in part by the School with the decision to meet together professionally.

- Though reflected correctly in teacher plan books, teachers do not adhere to the District Elementary Curriculum Weekly Time Schedule, in actual lessons. Grades 1,2,3 are scheduled for 750 minutes of ELA per week (150 minutes/day) and 450 minutes (90 minutes/day) of math. Grades 4,5 are required to have 600 minutes per week (120 minutes per day) of ELA and 400 minutes (80 minutes per day) of math.
- There was little evidence in plan books that instructional planning is based on an understanding of the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework and organized around individual student needs in achieving mastery of the relevant standard.
- This school year, teachers have committed time to professional planning together and two after School workshops have already taken place.

Finding: There is a serious inconsistency in teaching styles and methodology within the School; very little instruction observed suggested familiarity with standards based teaching.

- Lessons observed were teacher directed in most cases with little or no student participation/involvement except to listen and answer when called upon. Lessons are directed to the middle learner. The result is under-performance for higher and lower performing students. This type of teaching does not focus on the mastery of the standard by all. This style of instruction was seen in 85% of classrooms visited.
- Though learning centers were in evidence in some classrooms, use of them did not occur until day two of the visit. The use of learning centers was seen in only 10% of classrooms visited. Students are more often required to choose a worksheet and return to their desks to work, usually independently. Some teamwork was observed in two classes.
- Simple questioning techniques were used in most classrooms observed, however the techniques did not engage the upper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy – e.g. analysis and synthesis. One or two word responses are accepted, and this therefore becomes the expectation. The opportunity for students to support or respond with evidence is not given nor, does it appear to be expected.

Recommendations

- 1 The District must provide professional development in Standards based planning and teaching for the faculty as a whole.
- 2 Building on her current practice, the principal must monitor planning books on a two weekly basis and provide critical comments for improving planning.
- 3 Teachers must be encouraged to share good practice, so that the professional skills seen in some classrooms become the norm.

Informing Practice with Data

Finding: Teachers engage in item analysis of MCAS results but this is not reflected at the level of individual lesson plans.

- Though the District and School provided evidence of working with teachers on the analysis of MCAS data, lessons observed were not illustrative of teachers providing instruction at the right level to enable each students to achieve mastery.
- There was little evidence of the use of formative assessment in classrooms observed; in many cases students received little feedback on their learning and there was insufficient attention to the pace and level of the individual learner; instruction was not differentiated to meet the needs of individual students.
- For students requiring more time for mastery there were insufficient safety nets to ensure that students who were not understanding received help, more time or additional instruction.

Finding: School Based Assessment is not being used constructively at any level to improve student learning.

- Teachers stated that summative assessments were used to measure student progress, but no evidence was available to reviewers during this visit. Though assessments are given three times per year in the form of STAR, DRA and DIBELS there is little evidence that the results are currently used in such a way as to alter or modify instruction. Grouping students by skill level to achieve mastery was not observed.
- There was little evidence in plan books or in student work in folders or posted as display that formative assessment is used as a matter of routine to give feedback to students in a way that helps them to correct their errors and achieve mastery.

Recommendation

- 1 The District must continue to provide intensive coaching in MCAS analysis and provide teachers with examples of learning materials to meet objectives at appropriate grade levels for Standards.
- 2 The District must provide professional development in formative assessment and assessment embedded in instruction.
- 3 The principal and leadership team must look at student work across all grades and all classes, using an agreed schedule and protocol to ensure that adequate constructive feedback is being given.

Time for Teachers and Students

Finding: Teachers at the School take seriously the need for professional planning time together.

- There had already been two professional sessions scheduled and completed by the time of the review in early October. Whilst not mandatory, all teachers were invited to contribute and all did. Teachers used the first session to formulate a plan for setting up common genre studies and to set the dates for each genre area. They used a second session to

analyze MCAS data with the School support specialist. This is an effective School-wide endeavor, largely driven by the teachers' enthusiasm and professionalism.

Finding: Because of their under-developed literacy skills students need more time for mastery in ELA and Reading.

- Many students would benefit from a longer School day or more time for learning during the School week or during special summer programs. The taught curriculum gives too little opportunity for group work, investigation or connecting learning with personal experience. Additional time is not currently available for activities that incorporate these learning styles.
- The need for more time for mastery applies particularly to students whose first language is not English. Several parents interviewed expressed disappointment that this supplemental support was not available and the urgent need for such provision.

Recommendation

- 1 Student data must be reviewed so that 'at risk' students and students who need extra support to bridge the achievement gap are identified.
- 2 Extended day and/or extended study periods on Saturdays or during the School vacation must be made available.
- 3 A schedule for each identified student must be planned so the required amount of extra time is provided to achieve mastery. This alone is likely to have a marked impact on improving achievement scores.
- 4 Creative ways to schedule the week so as to allow additional time for teachers to share best practice and Look at Student Work (LASW) must be sought.

Leadership for Instructional Improvement

Finding: There is a good foundation from which to develop instructional leadership at the School, but it is not yet sufficiently robust.

- The current principal spoke with enthusiasm of appointing each member of faculty to the leadership team. District officials interviewed supported this initiative. Staff members interviewed do not yet speak with the authority of instructional leaders, but with appropriate support from the School support specialist there is potential for them to share responsibility for learning in the School.
- The planning sessions faculty has decided to hold and attend on Mondays is an early sign of their sense of unity and purpose. Morale in the School is remarkably high, but teachers also spoke openly of the way uncertainty about the School's future (and therefore their own) impacted their sense of professional well-being.
- The current principal recognizes the need for her own professional development and is attending the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) program as well as the

District based *Looking at Learning* program which gives principals the opportunity to learn from each other by reviewing each other's instructional leadership practice.

Finding: The School principal together with the District School support specialist and other District staff plan to provide stronger instructional leadership.

- The School support specialist told the team that he makes more frequent visits to George Dunbar than to most other Schools and will continue to do so. The Principal and staff feel supported by the School support specialist's coaching in data analysis. This year the School support specialist has recognized the need to coach staff more directly in delivering teaching objectives to close the performance gap in mastering Standards. The team was told that this additional support would be provided.
- In interviews, District personnel told the team that a District wide Reading First specialist would work with the principal to provide coaching in curriculum, data driven instructional planning and program scheduling.

Recommendation

1. The School support specialist must work in a planned way with all other interventionists responsible for providing instructional leadership support or coaching. It is important that advice and support for the leadership team, and the principal in particular is optimally aligned.
2. The School leadership team must have an incentive to invest in the development work of the School. Any doubts about the future of the School should therefore be resolved as soon as possible. (See District section of report above).

Lesson Observation Synopsis

Fourteen lessons were observed by three reviewers over two days. The synopsis below give a sense of the effectiveness of instruction in each of the three areas reviewed: **Preparation for Instruction; Delivery of Instruction; Assessment of Learning.**

Preparation for instruction varied from lesson to lesson in terms of:

- connecting the lesson to prior learning,
- stating and/or posting the objective
- reviewing the last lesson
- relating the lesson to Massachusetts Curriculum Standards

In most lessons one of these elements of preparation was present, but few lessons demonstrated more than one. Some lessons demonstrated none.

Delivery of Instruction similarly varied greatly. There were examples of a variety of instruction being used to reinforce learning and the use of searching questions to stimulate higher order thinking. These elements were seen in a minority of classes, however, and generally

lessons were teacher directed and procedural. The use of time for learning also varied. In some classes the pace was brisk, but overall because of a lack of differentiation many students were not enabled to use time to their best advantage. In some classes lengthy periods of time were spent on class management and transitioning. Generally, there was little evidence of students being encouraged to take initiative for their own learning at the appropriate level. Because the instruction was not obviously standards based in most classrooms there was little evidence of students being held accountable to a common standard. In some but not all classrooms, students received feedback; in a small number of cases this was detailed and individual. Overall, expectations for behavior were much higher than expectations for participation or learning.

Assessment of Learning while there were isolated examples of the use of formative assessment in the lessons observed, overall this was the area of greatest shortcoming. In many lessons no feedback was observed other than general encouragement.

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The Review was conducted and Report compiled on behalf of The Massachusetts Department of Education by staff from Class Measures Limited, chaired by Peter Davies, Lead Consultant District and School Accountability www.calssmeasures.com