

School Panel Review Report Abraham Lincoln Elementary School New Bedford 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. New Bedford's Abraham Lincoln 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 Abraham Lincoln Elementary School is deemed underperforming. 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 underperforming school, occurs at the next stage of the school review process.

Abraham Lincoln Elementary School Profile

Enrollment

The Abraham Lincoln Elementary School serves students in Kindergarten through Grade 5. Enrollment at Lincoln Elementary changed little between 2004 and 2005. Between 2003 and 2004, enrollment dropped by 38 students, partly because the school's Grade 6 classes moved to the middle school. The school's 2005 enrollment was 292 students.

Between 2002 and 2005, student demographics stayed relatively stable. Proportions of Lincoln Elementary student subgroups in 2005, as compared to state averages, are presented next:

Subgroup	2005 Enrollment (%)	
	School	State
Asian	0	5
Black	5	9
Hispanic	11	12
Native American	1	0.3
White	84	74
Low-Income	63	28
First Language Not English	11	14
Limited English Proficient	1	5
Special Education	11	16

In 2005, the attendance rate at Lincoln Elementary was 97.2 percent, with students absent 4.8 days on average. Lincoln Elementary School’s 2005 attendance rate is 3.0 percent better than the state average for 2005, with attendance for students in Grades 2 through 5 being slightly better than attendance for Grade 1 and Kindergarten students. Chronically absent students accounted for 3.5 percent of the student population in 2005. The school’s retention rate was 4.3 percent in 2004, the last year for which these data are available. At the time that the panel review was conducted, Lincoln Elementary had had no in-school suspensions in 2005, while out-of-school suspensions averaged 2.4 percent. Averages in 2005 for the state were 4.5 percent for in-school and 6.1 percent for out-of-school suspensions.

Staffing

The 2005-2006 Lincoln Elementary School staffing report indicates that the school is comprised of one administrator, 14 teachers, two coaches, one school social worker/adjustment counselor, and one school secretary. The principal has been at the school for 18 years and has a total of 19 years of administrative experience. Of the teachers, approximately 71 percent have been at the school for five years or more, and 21 percent, for ten years or more. Two of the 17 teachers at Lincoln Elementary hold a Master’s degree, and all are certified in General Elementary Education.

MCAS Overview

Students at the Lincoln Elementary School are assessed in Grade 3 in reading and in Grade 4 in both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Lincoln Elementary School’s Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report for 2005 Mid-Cycle IV shows that the school is in Corrective Action for English language arts (ELA) and has no accountability status for mathematics. The school failed to make AYP in ELA in 2004 and 2005 in the aggregate and for its reported subgroups of Low-Income and White students.¹ In mathematics in 2005, the school did not make AYP in the aggregate. In mathematics, Lincoln Elementary School’s subgroups were not of sufficient size to be reported. In the aggregate, the school made AYP in mathematics in 2003 and 2004, but not from 1999 through 2002.

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 percent 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 Lincoln School in 2005 were Low-Income and White for ELA. No subgroups were of sufficient size to be reported in math.

In 2005, the aggregate Composite Performance Indices (CPIs) for the Lincoln Elementary School were 66.2 in ELA and 56.3 in mathematics. Year-by-year aggregate CPIs are shown below:

Year-by-Year Aggregate CPI Data Summary		
Year	ELA	Math
2001	68.7	45.3
2002	65.3	45.0
2003	71.3	52.4
2004	68.6	66.9
2005	66.2	56.3
State Target 2005	80.5	68.7

GRADE 3

Reading MCAS Results

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

2005 Reading	Percent		
	P	NI	W/F
Aggregate	28	62	11
Regular Education	29	60	11

As the data above indicates, the majority (73 percent) of Lincoln Elementary School's Grade 3 students in the aggregate scored in the Needs Improvement and Warning/Failing categories combined, while 28 percent scored Proficient. Over the years since 2001, the percentage of students scoring Proficient dropped (most significantly, between 2003 and 2004), and both of its lower categories grew.

Aggregate Reading	Percent		
	P	NI	W/F
2005	28	62	11
2004	26	58	16
2003	50	42	8
2002	37	51	11
2001	43	50	7

The school did, however, make slight progress between 2004 and 2005 in terms of moving students from Warning/Failing to Needs Improvement and in increasing its Proficient category.

GRADE 4

ELA MCAS Results

Lincoln Elementary School’s results from the 2005 Grade 4 ELA MCAS are presented next:

2005 ELA	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
Aggregate	0	20	68	12
Regular Education	0	21	68	11

In ELA, 80 percent of Lincoln Elementary School’s Grade 4 students scored in the low categories on the MCAS, while only 20 percent scored Proficient and no students scored Advanced. Reviewing the school’s 2005 data in comparison to ELA MCAS performance data from the past four years, it can be noted that there have been reductions in the Warning/Failing category, accompanied by reductions in the Proficient category between 2003 and 2005. Between 2004 and 2005, there was also a decrease from 5 percent of students scoring Advanced to no students scoring at that level. Aggregate ELA data from 2001 to 2005 are presented here:

Aggregate ELA	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
2005	0	20	68	12
2004	5	29	59	7
2003	0	33	36	31
2002	0	17	52	30
2001	0	17	56	27

GRADE 4

Mathematics MCAS Results

Mathematics MCAS results for Lincoln Elementary School in 2005 are shown below:

2005 Mathematics	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
Aggregate	0	12	68	20
Regular Education	0	13	68	18

While 88 percent of Grade 4 students scored in the Warning/Failing and Needs Improvement range, 12 percent scored Proficient and no students earned an Advanced score. Mathematics MCAS data from 2001 to 2005 are presented in the table on the next page:

Aggregate Mathematics	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
2005	0	12	68	20
2004	7	22	51	20
2003	0	14	49	38
2002	2	2	51	45
2001	0	10	59	32

The school reduced its Warning/Failing category between 2001 and 2005, moving students into the Needs Improvement category. Its Proficient and Advanced categories fluctuated during the same time period. However, between 2004 and 2005, students scoring in the upper categories (Proficient and Advanced) declined from 29 percent to 12 percent.

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 Panel Review (PR) team and the Department of Education (DOE) found that the Abraham Lincoln Elementary School Improvement Plan is not clear and specific enough to guide the implementation of planned improvement initiatives in its written form. There is strong evidence, however, that the school is implementing a common set of coherent strategies to address students' learning needs. Although there is substantial evidence that the school is making classroom changes in instructional practice and using assessments to inform instruction, these data are not formative or benchmarked and, therefore, the school is presently unable to claim that any student gains have been made relative to SIP initiatives.

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 were submitted in preparation for school panel reviews scheduled in November and December 2005. Teams of three Department of Education 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 PR team and the DOE found that the Abraham Lincoln Elementary School Improvement Plan (SIP) and subsequent addenda, in written form, are neither clear nor specific enough to guide the implementation of planned improvement initiatives. Student performance goals are not clear and measurable, and goals for achieving AYP are set too low. Identified student needs are not expressed in terms of root causes. The SIP does not include timelines for implementation of specific strategies or benchmarks to measure student gains as a result of this implementation.

The school has conducted MCAS analysis and has identified student performance goals and learning objectives. It set revised goals for this year's plan based on 2005 MCAS results, using the Composite Performance Index (CPI) as its measure. However, the target set has been mistakenly based on mid-cycle data rather than data from the current cycle, resulting in goals that are too low to allow the school to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in the following cycle. This error indicates that the school has not made use of the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) goal-setting tool to which the district has access. Plan reviewers were unable to determine whether the original goals would have allowed the school to make AYP; regardless, those goals do not represent high expectations for school achievement. The English language arts goal, for example, calls for increasing the number of students in Proficient by four only and decreasing the number in Warning/Failing by two-three students. In mathematics, the goal calls for increasing the number of students in Proficient by one-two only and decreasing the number in Warning/Failing by two students.

The Lincoln Elementary School has identified causes of low student performance, but several of the causal statements included in the plan refer to weaknesses in students' abilities rather than the causes of those weaknesses—for example, students' "dearth of general knowledge" and "ingrained non-standard English." Other identified causes are too broad (for example, a "lack of development of higher-level thinking skills") to lead to specific strategies for dealing with the causes. Because the causes do not describe specific weaknesses in curriculum, instruction, assessment, or school infrastructure, it is difficult to judge whether the correct strategies to address the causes have been chosen.

The strategies for improved student performance are not described in detail, so it is difficult for users of the plan to understand how the strategies will be implemented. Although notes about some professional development are included in the SIP, it is unclear who will receive the professional development, when it will be provided, and who will provide it. The SIP contains no specific action plans describing the specific steps required to carry out the strategies, and no timelines for when the strategies will be completed.

Presently, data used by the school to assess student gains as a result of the implementation of strategies and instructional initiatives remain informal and anecdotal, although the school reports that there are plans to address this issue in the future. Because the SIP lacks specific timelines and benchmarks, the school does not currently have a systematic method for measuring gains in relation to SIP implementation.

As noted, the overall plan and its addenda, in their present form, are not clear and specific enough to guide implementation of planned improvement initiatives. Handwritten notes throughout the plan reviewed by the PR team, as well as the more recent addenda called "Shortcut[s] to School Improvement," are evidence that the school has attended to the plan

throughout the past year. The plan itself, however, is not an effective tool for communicating the school's vision for improved instruction or for detailing how that vision will be realized.

Based on panelists' individual reviews of the written plan, on the Department of Education's assessment of the document in its written form, and on evidence collected while on site at the school, the PR team concluded that the Lincoln Elementary School does not have a clear written plan to guide the implementation of planned improvement initiatives.

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

The PR team determined that the plan was developed through a process that will support its successful implementation. The principal sought the input of all stakeholders at the school level to develop the plan. The school's principal and staff meet weekly to review student performance data in order to make changes to instruction and, if necessary, to adjust the SIP. Although the data are not benchmark data, this regular review of student performance indicates that the school is focused on making improvements. Focusing on strategies in the plan is also part of regular practice at the school. These weekly meetings center on student achievement and on implementation of initiatives in the plan.

The principal reported to the PR team that there was input from all stakeholders at the school level in the development of the SIP and any further addenda. Three years ago, the assistant superintendent in charge of English language arts, who previously had been trained in the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) process by the DOE, trained the school's principal in this process. Following this, the principal asked specific teachers representing the different grade levels to form a School Leadership Team to lead PIM efforts under her leadership. The leadership team produced draft sections of the SIP and shared them with teachers at faculty meetings to enable the full staff to give feedback and input. The leadership team incorporated the feedback into the plan. The principal reviewed drafts with the School Council, which also offered feedback and suggestions. The 2003-2004 SIP was submitted to the district for approval and was reviewed by the DOE-funded school support specialist who works full-time for the New Bedford Public Schools and whose primary responsibility is to help schools create, refine, and implement improvement plans. The principal followed the same procedure for the next two plans, including the 2005-2006 SIP. There was no feedback given by the district office or the school support specialist, however, on either the 2004-2005 SIP or the 2005-2006 SIP until the month prior to the panel review.

The SIP has been distributed to all Lincoln Elementary staff and has been discussed at both School Council and parent meetings. Staff members review aspects of the SIP weekly in grade-level meetings. Whole-faculty reviews of the plan take place at monthly faculty meetings. Teachers are required to send home monthly newsletters; the principal sends home her own newsletter on a monthly basis. These newsletters include information regarding classroom initiatives and whole-school practices that emanate from the SIP. Each teacher has also established a webpage where parents are kept informed of aspects of the plan's initiatives. In addition, webpages list homework assignments and links and provide suggestions for extended student learning. Based on these regular practices, it is clear that stakeholders at the school level are well informed of school's improvement initiatives.

The school has a well thought-out process for making revisions to the SIP that is marked by ongoing dialogue. Through creative scheduling, the principal has provided weekly grade-level meeting times during which she meets with each grade-level team to discuss and review student progress and classroom instructional practices related to school improvement. These teams analyze recent student data or assessment material and decide, for example, whether to change student instructional groupings to better meet individual student needs or to change instructional practice. Using information from these team discussions, the principal follows up with classroom walkthroughs or visits to observe particular students or aspects of classroom practice. At times, the information gathered at the grade-level meetings is used to edit and revise the SIP in the form of “Shortcut[s] to School Improvement.” The Shortcuts are user-friendly and are distributed to all staff. Teachers noted that they refer to the Shortcut documents on a regular basis. The principal referred to these as “living documents.”

One example of the school’s focus on and adjustment of the SIP is as follows: There was a school-wide focus on genre included in the SIP and in practice. In interviews and focus groups during the panel review, teachers noted that genre is now embedded in classroom lessons and no longer needs to be an improvement focus. As noted earlier, the SIP initiatives are discussed not only at grade-level meetings but also at faculty meetings with more school-wide attention. At the individual teacher level, teachers get monthly feedback relative to lesson plans from the principal, who checks to see that objectives are clearly matched to learning standards and that SIP initiatives are being addressed. Members of the PR team noted plan books with carefully written lesson objectives in several classrooms. For further monitoring of instructional practice, the principal requires that teachers submit a monthly form called the “Teacher’s Monthly Report” to the principal to describe specific instructional goals or concerns in their classrooms. The principal will request the assistance of either the ELA or mathematics coach—each a full-time Lincoln Elementary School staff member—to provide assistance through coaching and modeling, if she believes that a teacher could benefit from this. In reviewing samples of teacher evaluations, panel members saw examples of very specific feedback regarding areas of instructional weakness. The PR team concluded that there is significant evidence that the principal has established a thorough procedure for reviewing and monitoring SIP initiatives on several levels, despite the fact that well-defined timelines and implementation benchmarks are lacking in the current written plan.

Although the school reports that there is a plan for developing benchmark assessments, the data currently used to assess student progress are based on individual teacher-selected classroom assessments. The principal and teachers acknowledge that gains in student performance are measured by ongoing classroom assessments. Therefore, gains identified by school leaders and staff members were viewed by the PR team as anecdotal rather than based on systematic benchmark assessments. Despite this, it was clear to the PR team that all staff members and school leaders at Lincoln Elementary School gather and analyze data on a regular basis. This year, for example, the principal has required a written Individual Student Success Plan (ISSP) for every child, not just for those who are at-risk. Data are gathered and recorded on ISSP sheets, and student progress is checked weekly. Both the teachers and the principal track the progress of every student and, when needed, make adjustments to grouping and instruction.

The principal plans to have benchmark assessments in place this year to measure progress, particularly in student comprehension. In January, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS)—a phonemic awareness and fluency test—will be given to measure gains since

September 2005 in this area. In the upper grades, students are assessed using the Corrective Reading Fluency test and the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE). The PR team determined that, although the data used at present are not benchmarked to measure gains relative to SIP initiatives, the procedure established for looking at data to inform instruction is strong and highly effective. It will stand to serve the school well, once the school refines its plan and begins monitoring the implementation of a sound written SIP.

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

Although the Lincoln Elementary SIP is not written clearly enough to be a guiding document at present, there is strong evidence that the school is implementing a common set of coherent strategies to address student learning needs. Teachers confidently described the SIP initiatives being implemented throughout the school and within grade levels. Panelists observed focused initiatives being practiced in all classrooms visited. Teachers have participated in professional development connected to new district-adopted mathematics and reading series, despite the fact that the timing of district-provided training was not aligned with the school's implementation of these curricular programs, (i.e., training in certain units came after the units were taught in the classrooms, and teachers note that additional training would be beneficial). Teachers are offered training support for other initiatives through the literacy and mathematics coaches.

In interviews and in focus groups, teachers confidently described SIP initiatives being implemented throughout the school and within their specific grade levels. The PR team heard consistent reports that teachers are using the new *Open Court* reading program for English language arts instruction and the *SRA* series for mathematics. They are incorporating ways to stress vocabulary development in lessons across the curriculum. Open-response questions are developed for all subjects, particularly in the upper grades, and teachers reported that they are more comfortable with including this type of question in subject-area assessments than they were in the past. Teachers reported that students are writing more often and that they are using rubrics to judge the organization and content of their own work. All classrooms, K through Grade 5, have workshop sessions up to four times a week. During the workshop, students are broken into flexible or skill-specific groups for practice and instruction. In some grades (Grade 3, in particular), teachers actually switch students from two classrooms to make the most efficient use of time during these blocks in which skills-work, collegial work, and targeted practice can take place. Initiatives such as workshop are identified in the SIP and are being implemented across the school.

Panel members observed the initiatives described above in all 11 classrooms visited. Panelists noted word walls and concept boards and saw written objectives and schedules of skills and strategies to be practiced for the day posted in Lincoln Elementary School classrooms. Half the observers heard teachers discussing lesson objectives with students at the start of lessons. Observers also heard teachers using questioning techniques that required students to respond at higher levels of thought and explanation. Further, in follow-up interviews, teachers spoke about students using higher-level thinking skills in group work. Teachers also noted that students are learning to come to consensus during problem-solving sessions. In all classrooms observed, panelists saw some practice in fluency, aspects of work on vocabulary, and clear indicators that workshop was part of weekly instructional practice. In "Teacher Bible" notebooks, which include data and materials related to the SIP, observers also saw an ISSP for each student in class. When asked about specific students, teachers spoke comfortably and in detail about

progress related to individual children. The PR team found significant and consistent evidence that teachers are implementing the initiatives included in the SIP.

Teachers have participated in professional development connected to the new mathematics and reading textbooks. Teachers have been offered training and support in implementing these programs. Three years ago, the district purchased the *SRA* mathematics program for elementary schools. Teachers at that time were trained to use program materials. In addition, Grades K-3 received a new reading series, *Open Court*, and had initial training on using its materials. In the fall of 2004, Grade 4 teachers received the new *Open Court* materials, yet it was not until September 2005—a year after implementation of the new series—that they received any training. Teachers of Grade 5 received the new *Open Court* series in 2005 and were trained, along with the Grade 4 teachers, for two days in September 2005. Since August 2005, the school has been involved in a U.S. Department of Education *Expanding the Reach (ETR) Project* designed to “expand the reach of scientifically based reading research,” which provides the faculty with additional literacy training. Through the district’s Title 1 funds, teachers were trained by Mass Insight in mathematics content.

When asked about professional development in focus groups and interviews, teachers reported that they are satisfied with the training they have received at this point, yet were upset with the initial lack of (and poor timing of) training connected to implementing the new reading program. They also noted that most of the effective training they receive seems to come from the efforts of the principal, rather than from the district. District trainings, they noted, are often not timed well and are often not what teachers believe is most needed. The mathematics content training that has been provided to cohorts of teachers throughout New Bedford, for example, pulls teachers out of the classroom for full-day training sessions each week. Teachers reported that the quality and content of the training did not warrant the disruption in routine for students whose teachers had to leave them behind with a substitute teacher on a frequent basis.

Based on information gathered on-site at the school, the PR team concluded that the Lincoln Elementary School has a comprehensive procedure in place for implementing improvement strategies and for monitoring and supporting this implementation.

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

The Lincoln Elementary School is not currently able to provide any documented evidence that students have made gains relative to the implementation of SIP initiatives. Nevertheless, the school has made a strong, concerted effort to analyze MCAS results and use beginning-of-the-year assessments to identify student needs and to group students. The principal and staff have analyzed assessment data to make revisions to the SIP but cannot, as yet, clearly note whether gains have been made relative to the initiatives. Teachers unanimously describe changes in classroom practice relative to the implementation of SIP initiatives.

Benchmark testing with timelines for implementation to measure gains in student achievement is not in place either in the written plan or in practice at the Lincoln Elementary School. The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) given at the end of the year is used as a tool for promotional purposes but not as benchmark testing. The principal plans to address this problem and is working to put in place a test to benchmark gains that is more objective than the *Open Court* unit or theme tests for measuring progress in ELA. In January, students in Grades 1

through 5 will be given a mid-course DIBELS assessment, which will help teachers to see what gains have been made in terms of students' fluency and phonemic awareness.

The school analyzes MCAS results and beginning-of-the-year assessments to identify students' instructional needs and to group students. Following this initial review—in lieu of benchmark data—the principal and staff look at ongoing classroom assessments and other informal teacher data to note student gains and to make revisions to the SIP. Although school personnel recognize that this evidence is not conclusive enough to clearly note whether gains have been made relative to specific initiatives, they report that it has given them important information regarding student progress, especially in ELA. Teachers noted that at the end of the year, Grade 2 students consistently achieved stanines of eight or nine on the district-wide GRADE test—higher stanines than ever recorded before. They noted that the DRA scores used at the end of the year for promotional purposes indicated higher student achievement than in the past. Teachers report that they see increased fluency in the upper grades because of the Corrective Action Fluency Reading Program and, as a result, have moved students into different workshop groups. Teachers anecdotally noted that writing has improved in both form and content and that students are more confident in their writing abilities. At weekly grade-level meetings, teachers look at data they have on each student and regroup students within workshop groups as particular goals are met and as new needs come into focus. Although the assessments that the school is currently using are not benchmarked, there is evidence that they are used to monitor, inform, and adjust instructional practices.

In interviews and in focus group discussions, teachers described ways in which their classroom instructional practices have changed as a result of improvement initiatives. Teachers expressed enthusiasm, in particular, for using the workshop model (students gathered into small groups for different instructional purposes) for flexible and skills-based grouping. Staff reported that they are teaching what was often overlooked in the past more consistently through implementation of the new mathematics and reading series. In addition, teachers are more consciously addressing vocabulary development throughout the day; they are using open-response questions in all areas including mathematics; and they are giving students more opportunity to express their opinions and explain their thinking. Teachers also discussed how all staff are using more Special Education strategies with students, and strongly support the inclusion model currently in place at the school. They stated that they are comfortable looking at and using data to inform instruction. Teachers further noted that new district curriculum guides in both English language arts and mathematics have promoted more consistency of practice and better pacing in both subject areas.

The PR team concluded that, although there is substantial evidence that the school is making classroom changes in instructional practice and using data to inform instruction, the data presently used are not benchmarked. Therefore, despite its significant focus on data, the school is unable, at present, to claim that any student gains have been made specific to SIP initiatives.

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

There is strong and consistent evidence from multiple sources to indicate that, at the school level, there is strong communicative and instructional leadership to help in successfully implementing a sound School Improvement Plan. Support at the district level, however, has not been adequate

to assist in the development of a sound, written SIP, or in the ongoing monitoring of the implementation of its initiatives.

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

The PR team noted the staff's consistent claim that the principal is a strong and capable leader. The principal has established a comprehensive system for communication at all levels of the school community. Within this system, the principal has involved the staff in creating an instructional leadership framework to support changes in instructional practices. The atmosphere at the school is warm and supportive in appearance, as well as in emotional climate. The principal's high expectations are reflected in many ways throughout the school—particularly in the classrooms.

According to the principal and teachers, the most effective means of communication have been grade-level meetings and common planning time, during which discussions of teaching issues, student achievement and programmatic and instructional planning take place. In addition, the principal has established the following ways to communicate to staff, parents, and the larger school community:

- Monthly newsletters to parents from both the principal and individual classroom teachers
- Teacher webpages developed to display homework information, classroom news regarding instructional practice, links for accessing student learning opportunities, and other important information
- “Parents as Partners Coffee Hours,” during which grade-level teachers arrange to have children demonstrate to their parents what workshop time and other instructional initiatives look like
- Open Houses for parents, including nights of MCAS BINGO and Math Magic
- An End-of-Year Awards Ceremony where every child receives an award—(As stated by one member of the school community, “No seats [are] left!” Many parents, grandparents, and extended family members attend.)
- A Family Computer Lab, under development and being furnished with several refurbished computers and comfortable chairs, where parents can spend time with their children, engaged in technology-based academic enrichment activities.

In a focus group, parents expressed strong support and enthusiasm for the instructional initiatives at the school and believe that the school provides their children with challenging work and activities that help them learn. Although some parents noted that they were initially frustrated with the difficulty of assignments in recent years, after attending morning and evening workshops about new curriculum expectations, they are happy that their children are challenged and are pleased with the learning expectations the school provides.

The school environment is enhanced by plants and tables and chairs for sitting for a chat at the ends of corridors. The principal's office is inviting, with a couch, coffee table, and chairs so that people feel comfortable in a home-like atmosphere. The principal requests that all staff members and students wear nametags at all times so that everyone at the school can be addressed by name and can have a sense of belonging. Student attendance is higher for the school than it is for the district: The school's 2005 attendance rate was 97.2 percent, while the rate for the district, at 93.7 percent, was 3.5 percent lower. Throughout the school, panelists observed that students

have a high level of respect and good behavior. In a focus group, parents attributed this good behavior largely to the principal, stating, “She has respect for every child, and they respect her.”

Within this supportive environment, the principal has involved the staff in creating a strong instructional leadership framework. The principal made sure that each teacher belongs to one of the school’s leadership teams. All teachers are part of grade-level leadership teams. This assignment of leadership responsibilities is done so that everyone can have input into instructional decisions. The principal has established an effective communication and feedback loop regarding instructional practice and student achievement. As an experienced teacher stated, “She tells us what is good and [is] not afraid to tell us when it is bad.” The principal has designed an additional means of improving instructional practices called a “Ticket to Travel to See the Sights at the Lincoln Elementary School”—a peer review system where teachers, at least three times a year, are requested to visit two other classrooms to observe specific classroom practices. One of these visits is scheduled by the principal, and the other is the teacher’s choice.

The ELA and mathematics coaches’ services are used in effective and creative ways to support instructional leadership in the school. Whenever there are new staff development initiatives, the principal makes sure that the coaches are available to staff members (both senior staff and new teachers) for ongoing training and support. At other times, the coaches take students to the lab to work on both ELA and mathematics skills, while teachers meet to plan, review initiatives, and analyze student achievement. Coaches tutor students who are identified through assessment results for 12-week sessions of mathematics and ELA skills-work before school. In addition, coaches offer staff development for teachers in voluntary, after school drop-in study groups. Coaches also meet with grade-level teams for ongoing dialogue regarding instructional practices and their effect on student achievement. The coaches are an important part of the strong instructional leadership system that has been established at the school.

The principal maintains high expectations for all. The principal told panelists that she had an “aha” moment when she discovered that too much time was being spent looking at at-risk students while not enough time was being spent looking at the individual needs of all students. Staff members agreed that they were inadvertently holding some higher-performing students back by focusing their attention in this manner. Through the development of the ISSPs for all students, there is now more opportunity to challenge all students and move them up from their initial levels of performance. As one School Council parent representative described, “The more [my child] did, the more there was to do.” The superintendent, in commenting on the principal’s use of an ISSP for each student, noted, “She really felt she centered in on every child.” The PR team has substantial evidence that the principal has sound knowledge of each student’s individual level of performance and specific needs and ensures that high expectations in the classrooms are maintained for all students.

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

There is consistently high involvement and there is strong support for the implementation of the improvement efforts at Lincoln Elementary School. Staff expressed strong agreement that the SIP would promote gains in student performance, especially in ELA. There was strong evidence to indicate that teachers were involved in implementing initiatives in their classrooms. Although there are no benchmarks used to measure gains relative to the SIP at this time, teachers are involved in a comprehensive process for reviewing data and assessing the effectiveness of classroom practices as they affect student achievement.

On an anonymous DOE *Instructional Staff Survey*, 100 percent of respondents agreed that “our school has a well-defined plan for reaching student performance goals.” Another 93 percent agreed that “the curriculum implemented in our school is effective and appropriate.” In focus groups and in interviews, teachers consistently expressed optimism that the plan’s objectives were leading to higher student achievement.

The principal reported, “Many of the teachers have moved considerably along the spectrum of implementation of SIP initiatives.” She is pleased with the buy-in and progress, and she sees that teachers are truly collaborating. In focus groups and in interviews, teachers supported this claim and stated that they are planning weekly with grade-level peers to address student needs and to look at classroom practice. On the DOE *Instructional Staff Survey*, 93 percent of teachers report meeting once or twice a week for planning instruction and 93 percent, for discussing strategies and services for individual students. During weekly meetings, the principal corroborates this and says she sees evidence that faculty members are looking at and using data to inform their instruction. The PR team heard from teachers that they are pleased with the effectiveness of the initiatives they are implementing in their classrooms. As one teacher expressed during an interview, “We have a strong system of teamwork here.”

The PR team determined that there is strong evidence of teacher buy-in for the planned improvement efforts and that teachers are consistently involved in the review and assessment of SIP practices.

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

The district has provided resources in terms of materials, professional development, and personnel to the school. The district provided only minimal training in the writing of the SIP, however, giving insufficient support and feedback to help the school complete a sound written plan.

Through district-wide textbook adoptions, the school has received materials and training for both the *Open Court* reading and *SRA* mathematics programs. New district ELA and mathematics curriculum guides were written to reflect state standards. These were distributed to all schools. The social studies and science curricula have yet to be aligned to the current Curriculum Frameworks, so teachers must align their teaching on their own. With Title I funds, each elementary school, including the Lincoln Elementary School, has both a full-time ELA coach and a full-time mathematics coach to provide training and support for ongoing professional development at the school. Teachers have been trained in *Rigby* reading strategies and will, with Title I funding, receive further training in vocabulary strategies this year. Teachers have also been trained by the coaches in the use of different testing instruments and in interpreting data. Although teachers claim that they have received needed professional development in respect to the SIP initiatives, they express disappointment at the timeliness of the trainings. On the DOE *Instructional Staff Survey*, 73 percent indicated that district support for professional development is available but not adequate; 47 percent said the same regarding materials. The principal expressed frustration that there is no process in place at the district level for elementary schools to have input, as new budgets are designed, into staffing and other school needs.

The PR team found that district support was inadequate in assisting the school to write a clear and effective School Improvement Plan and providing necessary and ongoing feedback related to implementation. Although there was initial training of principals in the PIM process, there is no

evidence of a formal district process for writing the SIP. There is no ongoing conferencing or collaborating on the plan. The school's SIP was approved each year with no feedback to ensure that it was a clear and specific guiding document for improvement. The superintendent described a process for the development of the SIP to the PR team in which he stated that there is a school support specialist available 100 percent of the time to support schools in writing plans, but the Lincoln Elementary School received little support in developing its plans. The deputy superintendent stated that consultants were available to the school and that Lincoln Elementary School would receive 16-18 days of consultative services to support plan initiatives. The principal asked for this consultant support both verbally and in writing but, as yet, has not received a response from the district regarding this. She was called the day before a pre-planned professional development session at the school to see if she wanted to use the services of the consultant for the session. Because an agenda for the session had already been developed, she was not able to accept the services. She has heard no more regarding a consultant for the school this year.

When interviewed, the school support specialist reported that he has no authority to visit the school to help with the plan unless he is requested to do so by the principal. The school support specialist did give the principal feedback on the school's current plan after the school was assigned a Corrective Action status and was scheduled to undergo a panel review. He has met since then with the school coaches, who reported that they now feel comfortable in approaching him for assistance. Nevertheless, this assistance has come late, considering that the school has been developing plans for several years and has been unable to see the necessary improvements to avoid Corrective Action status in ELA.

The PR team concluded that, although there are some resources at the district level designed to support the writing and implementation of the SIP, the district has no formalized plan to ensure that schools will receive ongoing guidance and feedback to write a clear and effective SIP or benchmark the necessary gains in student achievement.

CONCLUSION

The PR team determined that, although the written Abraham Lincoln Elementary School Improvement Plan is not sound, the school, in practice, is enacting a consistent series of instructional initiatives. This process is inclusive, and it appears that it will support successful implementation of planned initiatives. Although student achievement gains resulting from changes in instructional practices cannot be documented, the school is involved in a process of ongoing review of data that results in changes in instruction and practice, and in revision of the School Improvement Plan.

The school has had inadequate district support in writing an effective School Improvement Plan. However, the conditions appear to be in place at the school level for supporting the successful implementation of a sound School Improvement Plan. These conditions include a strong principal, an effective school-based leadership team, and teachers who support improvement efforts and implement initiatives with enthusiasm and with a focus on data and on students as individual learners.

APPENDIX A
Team Members

Linda Moriarty, Panel Review Chair, SchoolWorks LLC, Beverly, MA

Eve Laubner, Ed.D., Panel Coordinator, Massachusetts Department of Education, Malden, MA

Joanne Grenier, Panelist, Grenier Educational Consulting, Attleboro, MA

Joseph P. Silvia, Panelist, School Improvement Plan Facilitator, Fall River Public Schools,
Fall River, MA

Betty Yokell, Panelist, Director of Fine Arts, Fall River Public Schools, Fall River, MA

APPENDIX B
Abraham Lincoln Elementary School
New Bedford 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.
- 9:30 a.m. —11:30 a.m.* **Team meeting # 1:** Team meets for the first time to discuss each panelist's individual analysis; team forms preliminary judgments on key questions.
- 11:30 a.m.—1 p.m.* **Lunch and travel to the school** (*NOTE: In districts undergoing multiple school reviews, superintendent interviews may be scheduled between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. at the hotel.*)
- 1:00 —2:00 p.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—4:30 p.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 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 Chairperson is free to work on report.

	Panelist A	Panelist B	Panelist C	Panelist D	Panelist E
1:00-1:30 p.m.	Teacher Focus Group 1		Teacher Focus Group 3		Prepare report
1:30-2:00 p.m.	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.